

ELZA DE FÁTIMA DISSENHA COSTA

UNSPEAKABLE THINGS (UN)SPOKEN:
THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK WOMEN
IN TONI MORRISON'S
BELOVED

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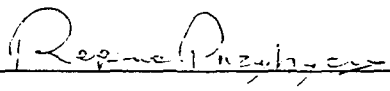
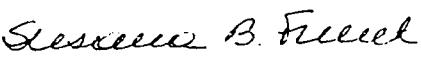
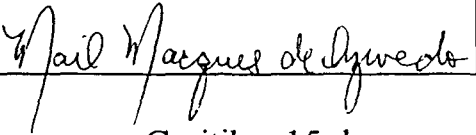
PARECER

Defesa de dissertação da Mestranda ELZA DE FÁTIMA DISSENHA COSTA, para obtenção do título de **Mestre em Letras**.

Os abaixo assinados Regina Przybycien, Susana Bornéo Funck e Mail Marques de Azevedo argüíram, nesta data, a candidata, a qual apresentou a dissertação:

“UNSPEAKABLE THINGS (UN)SPOKEN: THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK WOMEN IN TONI MORRISON’S BELOVED”

Procedida a argüição segundo o protocolo aprovado pelo Colegiado do Curso, a Banca é de parecer que a candidata está apta ao título de **Mestre em Letras**, tendo merecido os conceitos abaixo:

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Eu-Mulher

Uma gota de leite
me escorre entre os seios.
Uma mancha de sangue
me enfeita entre as pernas.
Meia palavra mordida
me foge da boca.
Vagos desejos insinuam esperanças.

Eu-mulher em rios vermelhos
inauguro a vida.
Em baixa voz
violento os tímpanos do mundo.
Antevejo.
Antecipo.
Antes-vivo
Antes – agora – o que há de vir.
Eu fêmea-matriz.
Eu força-motriz.
Eu-mulher
abrigo da semente
moto-contínuo
do mundo.

Conceição Evaristo

To Francine, my daughter

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ABSTRACT

This work consists of an investigation about the representation of black women in Toni Morrison's **Beloved** from the point of view of the slave mother. The main objective was to demonstrate how Morrison draws on history, memory, magic and imagination in order to invert Western assumptions about femininity and motherhood and to create new possibilities for this representation.

In order to prove this point, I studied first Morrison's hybrid cultural and literary heritage. After, I investigated the relationship between History and Literature, relying basically on the concept of history as an intersection between the real and the fictive worlds. I also analyzed the development of Magic Realism drawing on Alejo Carpentier's definition and on Frederick Jameson's reconceptualization of the term, as an attempt to investigate the connection between History and Magic Realism. Following this, I added the idea of Magic Realist story-telling as a means to improve the significance of texts, as proposed by Scott Simpkins.

My next stage was to analyze the slave narratives both as historical documents and fictional works, to show how the depiction of the slave women in these narratives helped to shape a negative image both in literature and in life. Additionally, I relied on some of Bakhtin's ideas about the dialogical relationships within language, heteroglossia and quasi-direct discourse in order to highlight some of the narrative strategies employed by Morrison. Finally, all these ideas show that Morrison succeeds in rescuing the erased voice of the black woman both in literature and in life with a singular mastery.

RESUMO

Este trabalho consiste de uma investigação sobre a representação da mulher negra no romance **Beloved**, de Toni Morrison, do ponto de vista da mãe escrava. O principal objetivo foi o de demonstrar como Morrison busca na história, na memória, na magia e na imaginação meios de inverter noções ocidentais sobre o feminino e a maternidade e de criar novas possibilidades para essa representação.

A fim de demonstrar este ponto de vista, primeiro estudei a herança cultural e literária híbrida de Toni Morrison. Após, investiguei a relação entre a História e a Literatura, baseando-me principalmente no conceito de história como um entremeio entre o mundo real e o imaginário. Também analisei o Realismo Mágico e sua relação com a história de acordo com as idéias de Alejo Carpentier e Frederick Jameson. Em seguida, especulei sobre o narrar mágico-realista como um meio de aumentar a significância de um texto, como proposto por Scott Simpkins.

Meu próximo passo foi analisar as narrativas da escravidão tanto como documentos históricos quanto como trabalhos ficcionais e mostrar como a descrição do feminino nestas narrativas ajudou a formar uma imagem negativa da mulher negra. Em seguida, contei com a ajuda de algumas idéias de Bakhtin sobre as relações dialógicas que ocorrem dentro da linguagem, e com seus conceitos de polifonia e discurso quase-direto como meio de iluminar algumas das estratégias narrativas empregadas por Morrison. Finalmente, todas estas idéias mostram que Morrison consegue resgatar a voz reprimida da mulher negra, tanto na literatura quanto na vida, com uma maestria singular.

INTRODUCTION:

We don't live in places where we can hear
those stories anymore; parents don't sit around
and tell their children those classical,
mythological archetypal stories that we heard
years ago.

Toni Morrison

Beloved is the fifth novel in Toni Morrison's writing career and it brought her to the forefront of discussions concerned specifically with the role of the black woman in contemporary political, academic and literary American Society. Her career, punctuated by humiliation as well as by triumph, shows her aptitude to unveil the social implications of being a black woman and proves her masterly command of the literary language. In addition, her work bears witness to the importance of the black imagination in the shaping of African-American and American literature. However, the merits she got along her career are a result not only of her great capacity for translating the inner, personal and communal life of black people into words and images, but are also a consequence of a national awareness of the black people's artistic production. This awareness started with the Black Movement of the sixties and with the feminist studies. Although both of these failed to incorporate the black female as the subject of their research, they

were in a way a stimulation to those interested in changing the status given to black people in general, and to the black woman in particular, both in literature and in society. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” Morrison exposes her concerns about Black people’s struggle to imagine themselves artistically now that the silence imposed upon them is being broken:

Now that the Afro-American artistic presence has been “discovered” actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves. We are not Isak Dinesen’s “aspects of nature,” nor Conrad’s unspeaking. We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, “other”. We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare those centers with the “raceless” one with which we are, all of us, most familiar. (Morrison Apud Bloom, 1990, p.208)

As Morrison states in the passage quoted above, it is time to recognize how black people are showing themselves imaginatively and artistically. And this is what she intends to do in her work: to write imaginatively and artistically about her own people and their silenced history.

In this thesis, I try to investigate how Morrison represents the black women, specially in the context of motherhood in slavery and to show how she achieves a deep sense of female identity by mingling history and magic in this representation. For Morrison, literature is a means of clarifying the roles that were obscured in the past and of giving nourishment. Although her main objective is to rescue the black woman that was repressed both in literature and in life, she emphasizes the role of the community and that of the black man in this rescue and shows how community, male, and female, complement each other in the search for identity. The power of the community and the search for identity are recurrent motifs in her novels.

I begin my investigation by showing Morrison's achievements in literature and in life, and by speculating about her familial and literary backgrounds as a woman who writes specifically from within the hybridism characteristic of African-American tradition. That is followed by a brief outline of her novels and her narrative techniques. In the next chapter, I try to show the connections between History and Literature, and how Morrison explores the blurring of borders between these two fields. I also speculate how History and Literature are shaped by ideologies and by the position (in time and in space) a person occupies in the world. I rely on Houston Baker's ideas, based on Barthes' view of history as discourse and Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, to explain how Western ideology has shaped the white American literary imagination. Following this,

there is a discussion about Magic Realism and its implications in Morrison's work, more specifically in the hybridism and historicity of **Beloved**. To define Magic Realism, I will depend basically on Alejo Carpentier's ideas. Further, I stretch the borders of the application of Magic Realism with the aid of Scott Simpkins's view of it as supplementation and also with Frederic Jameson's re-conceptualization of the term.

In chapter III, I examine traditional slave narratives both as historical documents and as fictional recreations of African-American history. I trace the development of slave narratives taking into account the demands of the white audience of those times in order to show how the historical and the fictional are interwoven. In this analysis, there is an attempt to show the influence of the slave narratives on the depiction of the slave woman and how white society's notions of femininity clashed against the status given to black women.

The next chapter is an attempt to analyze **Beloved** taken into consideration the hybridism of Morrison's African-American literary background and the historical and literary representation of black women. I start by relating Margareth Garner's story to its analogue in **Beloved**, the latter presenting an unconventional side of motherhood, one that clashes against the stereotyped figure of the black mammy. Following this, and relying on some of Bakhtin's ideas about discourse and speech in language, I examine how Morrison

reinscribes the history of the black woman through a complex net of interwoven relationships.

Up to very recently in the academic world students and teachers should not state openly the emotional motivations that underlined their works. Fortunately, things have changed, and now, we do not have to feel ashamed to show how we are emotionally tied to the works that we developed. The reasons that prompted me to choose Morrison's **Beloved** as the subject for my MA thesis are grounded in the emotional and intellectual reactions that I had while I was reading it. First, Morrison's aptitude in story-telling reminded me of one of my grandmothers. She was a lovely woman and a wonderful story-teller who taught me to love books and stories. How many wonderful stories she told me in my early childhood around her wooden stove! And how many enchanting, ghostly, fantastic and magical worlds became real through her words at those times!

A second point in my choice is related to Morrison's focus on slavery. I always thought that literature can teach us about private and communal life, so I wanted to research something that could enlarge my understanding of a people's personal and national history. Therefore, the topic should have some relationship with my historical background, and although in Brazil we had a different colonization from that of the United States, in both countries we find slavery as a point of historical and cultural reference. Learning about the damages of slavery in North America helped me to increase my knowledge about my own country, its

history and culture and also about contemporary social issues related to the status given to black people.

Additionally, the themes that Morrison develops in **Beloved** are very important in the study of the representation of black women both in literature and in history. By rescuing the black female voice that has been silenced by the discourse of the dominant Western white male ideology, Morrison was able to speak the unspeakable. Finally, I would like to add that, although there are many things that I still cannot fully understand in **Beloved**, I hope to shed a little bit of light on some aspects of this novel.

Chapter I

THE BLACK WOMAN WRITER BEHIND THE WORK

Tony Morrison is considered one of the most outstanding figures of contemporary African-American Literature. Her career as a writer has undergone a great change since the publication of her first novel, **The Bluest Eye**, in 1970. At that time it seems that American literary criticism was not yet ready to accept a black woman writer as someone worth paying attention to. Who could have imagined that twenty years later Morrison would be canonized by literary critics and be considered a great novelist?

Morrison's recognition was not achieved easily. Her first novel was written at night, when her children were sleeping. Being the provider for a single-headed family, she spent her daytime working as a textbook editor while she lived in Syracuse. Her first novel did not receive much attention of literary critics although it contained the seeds of what was to come. With the publication of two other novels, **Sula** in 1974 and **Song of Solomon** in 1977 she got a wider acclaim and became a well-known author. Her success increased with **Tar Baby** in 1981, and in the same year she was the first African American woman to be featured in the cover of **Newsweek** magazine since Zora Neale Hurston in 1943. **Beloved**, published in 1987, is the first book of a trilogy Morrison intended to write about

different kinds of love. In this novel she focuses on the nature of mother love and the American obsession with ownership grounded in slavery. The two other books of the trilogy are **Jazz**, published in 1991, and **Paradise**, published in 1998. She also wrote a play, **Dreaming Emmett**, first staged in New York in 1986.

It was with **Beloved**, published in 1987, that she got a special place in American Literature. With its publication she won many awards and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Full recognition came in 1993, when she was laureated with the Nobel Prize. Of all of her novels, **Beloved** is the one that has been the object of more literary studies, thus showing that Morrison achieved a point in which she helped to consolidate African-American Literature in the academic and literary world.

However, it is not only in the literary field that she comes to the forefront. Morrison became the symbol of the Afro-American women, a spokesperson for the black community in its longing for liberation and struggle against oppression. In addition, she has become a public intellectual who is currently the Robert F. Gooheen Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. Morrison has also published a great variety of books by black authors while she was a senior editor at Random House, thus helping to show the beauty and the importance of African American literature. Moreover, with her non-fictional book **Playing in the Dark**, published in 1991, in which she analyses novels written by Herman Melville and

Mark Twain, she shows how a strong ideology of whiteness that is set against the black presence in America was developed. Her study contributed to the debate related to the definition of American identity and the way readers access American literature.

Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford, daughter of Ramah Willis and George Wofford, in Lorain, Ohio. Morrison's grandfather, a worker in the coal mines, fled from the poverty and racism of Greenville and Birmingham and established the family in Ohio. Her father, George Wofford, came from Georgia, a violent racial state that had an "impact on his vision of white America". It was with him that Morrison got "a strong sense of her own value on her own terms"(McKay, 1993, p.414), and this sense of value helped to shape Morrison's way of writing about African-American people.

Differently from other black writers whose works were generally set in the rural Southern plantations or in the urban Northern ghettos, Morrison's work deals with midwestern black communities situated in Ohio. For her, Ohio is a very interesting state because, as Gates Jr. and McKay propose, besides helping to revise the geography people commonly associate with African American literature, it was also the place in which she was born and one of the main stations of the Underground Railroad¹. Moreover, it meant for her the possibility

¹ The Underground Railroad was a loosely arranged system to help slaves escape in America before the Civil War.

of “an escape from stereotyped black settings...” (Apud Gates Jr. and McKay, 1997, p.2095) thus enhancing her desire to provide new spatial addresses in the literature of black people.

Morrison's work provided debates that are significant to American literature and to American history in terms of black identity. For her, in fact, one cannot fully understand the history and literature of the United States without recognizing the importance of the African American presence. In her novels Morrison deals with issues related to major social concerns, such as:

The interrelatedness of racism, class exploitation and sexism, domination and imperialism; the spirituality and power of oral folk traditions and values; the mythic scope of the imagination; and the negotiation of slippery boundaries, specially for members of oppressed groups, between personal desire and political urgencies. Her work also articulates perennial human concerns and paradoxes: how are our concepts of the good, the beautiful and the powerful related; what is goodness and evil; how does our sense of identity derive from community while maintaining individual uniqueness? (Gates Jr. and McKay, 1997, p.2094)

Literature for Morrison is not only a matter of beauty and imagination but also a powerful way to deal with social and political concerns related both to the individual and to the community, as she puts it:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write), isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political.... It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political

and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. (Apud Gates Jr. and McKay, 1997, p. 2094)

This strong, visceral link of her writing with the social, the political and the aesthetically beautiful demands a deep emotional engagement between writer and reader. In fact, her work “expects, demands participatory reading” not only because it is political, but also because her language provides “some holes and spaces so the reader can come into it” (Apud Gates Jr. and McKay, 1977, p.2094). Despite the efforts we as readers have to make in order to fill in the spaces provided by her language, it seems that Morrison really succeeds in her task if we take into consideration her success and popularity among readers. The question of participating in the construction of a text, and Morrison really makes us do this, is something that encompasses a complex relationship between reader and writer. The entry into a text makes us feel vulnerable and anxious because it demands both emotional and intellectual efforts. Despite the fact that many times in Morrison’s novels we are allowed to share the knowledge of the omniscient narrator, concomitantly, we are invited to interact dialogically with the central characters of her narratives. This dialogical interaction follows the Bakhtinian sense of the term in that, “everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Bakhtin, 1992, p.426). Morrison’s narrative potentiality allows us to enter into the development of the narrative, and requires

a reevaluation of our own perceptions and interpretations of a literary work. It seems to me that it is exactly this fragility that we experience in the reading of her work, allied to the beauty and magical quality of her language and to the social and political content of her novels what makes Morrison's books so appealing and successful.

Her first novel, **The Bluest Eye**, examines the experiences of a black girl as she faces the ideal of beauty and the reality of violence within a black community. In a setting of poverty and low social status the characters hurt each other even if they do not want to do so. After the publication of **The Bluest Eye** Morrison's status as a book reviewer increased, and between 1970 and 1974, she worked on the publication of many reviews and essays on black history and American contemporary issues. In **Sula**, her second novel, Morrison deals with a community's concepts of good and evil portrayed through the relationship between two women, Nel and Sula, and their relationship with that community. While Nel is the portrait of the nurturing woman, Sula embodies the character of the adventurous woman in search of new experiences. In interviews, Morrison has emphasized how, by necessity, African American women have combined these two characteristics being both "the ship and the harbor". The Peace women, specially Eva, the grandmother and Sula, the granddaughter, are powerful black women characters.

Song of Solomon reveals a shift in the author's perspective and focuses the attention on the life of a young black man in search of his identity, encompassing the relationship between class and race. Although the novel is centered on a male character, the source of knowledge is found in the female characters. As a man alone, the protagonist is not able to find himself. He needs the guidance of his aunt, Pilate Dead. This novel was the first Black Book-of-the-Month Club selection since Richard Wright's **Native Son**, and it made Morrison the winner of the 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Her next novel, **Tar Baby**, was on the best-seller lists during four months. The novel is about a couple who moves from the Caribbean to New York and then to Florida in search of a true relationship between man and woman. While the novel examines the relationship between genders, it also analyses the possible relations between blacks and whites in contemporary society. After the publication of **Tar Baby** Morrison was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Jazz is about the 1920's and was prompted by a photograph shot taken by James Van Zee, an African American photographer. Morrison saw Van Zee's photo in Camille Billop's **The Harlem Book of the Dead**. The photo is of a young woman who was shot at a party by the man she loved, but refused to identify the man before her death in an attempt to protect him. The picture gave Morrison the inspiration not to discuss the love triangle that caused the girl's

death, but to speculate how the story is told, thus revisioning the way people “construct” or “reconstruct” what is viewed as a “real” fact.

In an interview with Toni Morrison, Nellie McKay said that the author’s achievements both in life and in art “enlarge the tradition of the strength, persistence, and accomplishments of black women in America” (McKay, 1993, p.413). Morrison’s models in real life were her grandmother and her mother. The first “left her home in the South with seven children and thirty dollars because she feared sexual violence against her maturing daughters” (McKay, 1993, p.413). Morrison’s mother worked hard in order to send her money for college and graduate school. If in life Morrison’s strength was drawn from female figures, in art she was aware of the power of black female precursors such as the slave poet Phillis Wheatley, Jessie Fauset (a novelist of the Harlem Renaissance of the 20’s), and Zora Neale Hurston, specially her work **Their Eyes were Watching God**, in which Hurston shows the richness of the black folk tradition.

African-American writers face a peculiar situation since they cannot be encompassed neither within the sphere of African nor of American writing. They are not African neither completely American. We can say that they live on the edge of a narrow border between African and American culture. Although they try to keep their African tradition in their writing by recapturing the rituals and beliefs of their ancestors, they have also been influenced by the American ideology. In this context, although there is an attempt to keep or to recover the

folk tradition of black people, one cannot forget that this tradition has already been modified due to the contact with the American mainstream culture, thus helping to shape the African-American hybrid culture. The meeting of two different world visions creates a dual perspective for the African-American writers. On the one hand, although they try to maintain the tradition of their forebears alive through their writings, this cannot be achieved in its totality since they have long been in contact with a different civilization, and therefore, look at things from another perspective. On the other hand, there are the literary influences writers receive both as readers and writers. Consciously or unconsciously, we are affected by what we read. In the case of an African-American editor and writer such as Morrison, the variety of readings she had and has to do can open a whole range of various literary possibilities. It is true that Morrison tries to catch specific qualities of the Black oral tradition such as its orality, folklore, and myths, but one should keep in mind the fact that, as a writer, she deals with different literary devices and techniques, which she learned in the transit between the academic and the literary worlds. She has been in contact with different kinds of writing and she has had the opportunity and the necessary skills to develop a writing that is characteristic of her own, one that tries to encompass the experience of being a black woman in a world ruled by white Euro-American concepts and ideas.

Morrison is very proud of her heritage. Her early life was shaped by black music, black language, black myths and folk rituals, all of them encompassed in the stories and songs of her childhood. McKay says of Morrison's early life and relatives:

Her grandfather played the violin, her parents told thrilling and terrifying ghost stories, and her mother sang and played the numbers by decoding dream symbols as they were manifest in a dream book that she kept. She tells of a childhood world filled with signs, visitations, and ways of knowing that encompassed more than concrete reality. (1993, p.414)

In terms of literary knowledge, Morrison had the pleasure of reading the great French, English and Russian novels and "became impressed by the quality of their specificity. In her writing she strives to capture the richness of black culture through its specificity"(McKay, 1993, p.414). The richness of the black culture Morrison finds specially in the enchantatory oral quality of storytellers, and this is a quality she tries to capture through the characters of her novels.

As a black woman writer, Morrison brings together the richness of her own tradition, with its use of magic, enchantment and rhythmic repetition, and the characteristics of Western classical narratives she read along her academic life. Considered by Henry Louis Gates Jr. as one of "the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature" who managed to "invent her own mode of literary representation" (Gates, Jr. and Appiah, 1993, p.ix),

Morrison was also influenced by William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, writers whose work she analyzed in her M.A thesis at Cornell University, and by the Magic realist fiction of Gabriel García Márquez. The influences which shaped Morrison's work were many and culminated in a literary achievement that is viewed as suggestive of a magic naturalistic fiction:

While she is clearly influenced by the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez and his Latin American contemporaries, Morrison and Márquez meet independently at a common ancestor, William Faulkner. Grounded in Faulkner, and informed by James Baldwin's densely lyrical experiments with a fictional prose rooted in the religious vernacular (the spirituals and gospel music, King Jamesian biblical cadences and allusions, the spoken Black prophetic voice) as well as jazz, blues, and the whole range of Black secular vernacular speech rituals and discourses, Morrison has evolved a register of representation that we might think of as a magical naturalism. Her work, in this sense, spans that great divide between the lyrical modernism of Zora Neale Hurston on the one hand, and the existential naturalist experimentation of Richard Wright on the other. (Gates, Jr., and Appiah, 1993, p.ix)

Besides these literary influences, there were also other factors that helped to shape Morrison's fiction. One point is related to the way Morrison writes from a black perspective in which, as suggested by Linden Peach, the blacks are at the center and the whites at the margins. In an interview to Claudia Tate, Morrison explains why her novels are centered on black people:

When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it's the world of black people. It's not that I won't write about white people. I just know that when I'm trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest those themes for me are the black people whom I invent. It's not deliberate or calculated or self-consciously black, because I recognize and despise the artificial black writing some writers do. I feel them slumming among black people. (Apud Peach, 1995, pp.5-6)

Another point that played a great part in the development of her work has to do with her status as a black woman. Although Morrison started writing her books at a time in which debates around the issue of black feminine representations did not have the status they acquired later in feminist, class, and gender studies, her books proved to give important contributions to later studies. Such studies on gender and class open up a whole range of new possibilities in relation to the representation of black woman. Therefore, Morrison's work in a way allowed critical readings that show how the literary history of the black woman was constructed under the ideology of traditional Western assumptions. In fact, many critics see Morrison's work as reactive to and subversive of the Western literary tradition. However, Morrison herself denied that she wrote in a response to it. Instead, she argues that in her books she writes what she calls 'village literature', a fiction that she defines as written for the tribe; that is, for a specific group, and which should "clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that

are not; and they ought to give nourishment.” (Leclair, Apud Gates, Jr. and Appiah, 1993, p.370). The clarification of roles that had become obscure is specially significant in Morrison’s work since one of her aims was to search for the identity of the black woman that was repressed by the white imagination. Linden Peach argues that although Morrison is sometimes contradictory in her interviews regarding to whom she addresses her novels, she “writes as a black woman with the experiences of black women in mind”(Peach, 1995, p.13), as she herself explains in another interview: “I write for black women. We are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving/loving way. They are writing to repossess, re-name, re-own” (MacKay, Apud Peach, 1995, p.14).

The search for identity and the clarification of roles veiled by centuries of oppression and exclusion are themes that are discussed through poignant visual images in **Beloved**. In the novel, this identity is concerned mainly with the question of motherhood. Basing the novel on historical slave narratives as well as on the folk and the classic tradition, Morrison discusses maternal love in bondage, speaking of things that only art can deal with, “unspeakable things unspoken” to use the title of one of her essays, that are brought painfully to the surface. Building her language upon the black oral tradition, Morrison retells the

story of slavery in literary terms, a kind of artistic revision of the Afro-American past through the perspective of the black woman writer.

The revision of such a terrible institution as slavery in American History can work as a quest for self identity and a renewed cultural strength for those who belong to the margins. For those who are at the center, this revision can be a way to deal with a past that they would prefer to erase from their history. Nevertheless, both to black and white people, slavery is an indelible mark, like an inscription that cannot be erased. In one way or another people have to learn to cope with it. Literature may be a means of coping with past errors, both private and universal. Moreover, through literature we can achieve a deeper understanding of facts, events and motivations that traditional History, in its attempt to be the true report of past events, can not encompass. The fact that actual events or stories acquire a different status when placed within fictional constructions, both in terms of form or content, creates the possibility of exploring angles refracted by the supposed objectivity of History. It may be a paradox, but it seems that exactly because Literature does not have to be faithful to reality, because it can explore the past or draw implications on what it could have been instead of the what it was reported to be, it offers the possibility of exploring hidden aspects of History, such as those that relate to a people's everyday struggles to survive, to love and to heal. Therefore, literature may be a

means of getting a deeper understanding of a people and its history, a way of enlarging our conceptions and beliefs about a specific culture.

The maturity that Morrison acquired as a subject in African-American literature and history she also got in relation to her own subject matters. She writes in such a way that a line of development can be traced since the publication of her first novel. She starts with a black girl's perspective of beauty in a black community ruled by the white imagination in **The Bluest Eye**; explores the duality of women divided between the traditional roles ascribed to them by society and the adventurous new experiences of a woman in search of new horizons and able to change her own destiny in **Sula**; follows the awakening of a man with the help of a woman in **Song of Solomon**; shows a black couple revisioning their own relationship and that with their employers in **Tar Baby** (in which white characters are also central figures), and in **Beloved** she creates the character Sethe, an ex-slave mother who fights against all odds to keep her children and give them nourishment (and develops her relationship with Paul D, a man who gives her some hope for a new future). In Morrison's novels, a recurrent motif is the search for identity, not only for the individual but for an entire culture because her themes are also closely connected to the role of the community in someone's life. The definition of a character's identity may work as a metaphor for the definition of a community's identity, its values and morals, and therefore, the characters' development is dependent on their relationship with their

community. For Morrison, the community is the means by which a character achieves a deep sense of identity and keeps the strength to go on. Moreover, one could say that the community could be viewed as a powerful presence, one that guides the ideas, feelings, emotions and actions of characters. Community is also a space for healing, for comfort, and for care for those characters caught in the traps of a system that denies the black people the status of human beings.

Chapter II

HISTORY, MAGIC REALISM, AND *BELOVED*

All history becomes subjective; in other words there is properly no History, only Biography. Every mind must know the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know.

–Emerson, “History”

. . . nos hemos forjado un lenguaje apto para expresar nuestras realidades, y el acontecimiento que nos venga al encuentro hallará en nosotros, novelistas de América Latina, los testigos, cronistas e intérpretes de nuestra gran realidad latinoamericana . . .

–Alejo Carpentier, *La Novela*

2.1 A historical account as the source of *Beloved*

In a critical essay about *Beloved*, Deborah HORVITZ says that “the text is so grounded in historical reality that it could be used to teach American history classes” (Horvitz, 1989, p.157). As Horvitz, many critics who deal with Morrison’s novel explain it, or explore it, having in mind the link between a historical moment in the United States, that is, the period of slavery, and its aftermath in literary terms. This does not mean that *Beloved* is to be considered a historical novel, for in fact, it is not. A historical novel “sets its events and characters in a well-defined historical context, and it may include both fictional

and real characters. It is often distinguished (in its more respectable forms) by convincing detailed description of the manners, building, institutions and scenery of its chosen setting, and generally attempts to convey a sense of historical verisimilitude.” (Hawthorn, 1985, p.16). Morrison did not write **Beloved** having in mind a commitment to historical verisimilitude. In fact the source for writing the novel was found when she was editing **The Black Book** and saw the fragments of an old newspaper story about a black woman who killed her daughter to avoid that her family be taken back to slavery. The story was about Margaret Garner, a black woman who ran from her master with her four children (the oldest a boy of five, the youngest an infant at the breast), her husband Robert and his parents. They were caught in a friend’s house in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the tragedy happened. When Margaret Garner saw her master and her husband’s master together with a posse of officers and realized that they would be captured, she took a shovel, cut her three-year-old daughter’s throat and tried unsuccessfully to kill the other two boys. Margaret Garner was sent to prison and then to trial, and then back to her owner. What really happened after the trial nobody knows for sure. Some say she drowned herself together with her youngest daughter when she was crossing back the Ohio River with her master.

Although **Beloved** is set in a specific historical context and is based on the real lives and sufferings of black slaves, and more specifically, on the lives of Margaret Garner, her children and husband, the main point is not to discuss what

really happened in their anonymous lives. Instead, it is, as Morrison explains, the necessity of working with the motivation behind the act and its implications as a way to keep in touch with the ancestors in order to find the black people's own identities. This link with the past, with the ancestors, depends largely on the ability to reconstruct memory. For Morrison "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was — that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way." (Apud RUSHDY, 1992, p.567). Differently from the historical novel, **Beloved** does not aim at having historical verisimilitude, but at drawing on the black people's memory of their past.

2.2 The borders between History and Literature

The attempt to recreate a past, nevertheless, establishes a connection between Literature and History. The question of the relationship between these two fields has raised much discussion both in historical and literary terms. Maria Teresa de Freitas, in her study of André Malraux's work, discusses the relationship between History and Literature as well as the difficulties to establish a clear border between them:

Historiadores de renome chegaram a afirmar que a História é um "romance verdadeiro"; críticos literários conceituados se perguntaram se há realmente um traço específico formal que distinga a narração de acontecimentos efetivamente ocorridos, da

narração imaginária. Alguns consideram a História uma “Ciência”, e exortam a que não se poupem esforços para separá-la da Literatura; outros a definem como sendo o conhecimento profundo do homem em sua infinita complexidade, e, como tal, bastante próxima daquilo que fazem os escritores literários. Vê-se bem como são frágeis as fronteiras entre as duas áreas.(Freitas, 1986, p.1)

Considered as “mirrors” of reality both fields raise questions about their connection. Where does History end and Literature begins? Where does representation end and creation begins?

History, as defined by Edward Hallett CARR, “reflects our own position in time”(Carr, 1961, p.5). This is to say that our conception of History depends largely on our own point of view in a given society. In the nineteenth century, for example, History was believed to be the objective recording of verifiable facts. The Positivists, claiming to History the status of a science, have strengthened this idea. The concept of History as strictly based on facts, however, proved to be a fallacy, and at the turn of the century, new voices rose against Positivism. Gustave Lanson, followed by Lucien Febvre, were some of these voices and, as Maria Teresa de Freitas concludes having in mind Lanson’s theory, History is closer to Literature than to Science: “por um lado, os documentos e testemunhos sobre os quais ela se apóia são suscetíveis de uma infinidade de interpretações, e o historiador, tendo que formar concepções a partir de indícios, põe muito de si mesmo em seu discurso; por outro lado, ao tentar descobrir os segredos da vida

do passado, captar sua essência, ele sai da Ciência e entra na Literatura.”(Freitas, ano, p.2)

Benedito Nunes, in a debate about the relationship between History and Literature at Instituto de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro says that History and Literature have in common the fact of using language as their medium, and added that “ambas são sintéticas e recapitulativas; ambas têm por objeto a atividade humana” (Nunes, 1988, p.12). Following Paul Veyne’s claim that “Como o romance, a História seleciona, simplifica e organiza, resume um século numa página”, Benedito Nunes concludes that the act of selection and organization depends basically on the work of imagination, an activity shared by both the historian and the novelist (Nunes, 1988, p.12). Moreover, the line that separates historical and fictional narratives becomes blurred “pela natureza desse *passado reconstruído*, quando se dá à expressão o seu peso ontológico de reconstrução de um passado que não mais existe, que já deixou de ser. Desse ponto de vista, a “realidade histórica” é tão *sui generis* quanto a “irrealidade” da ficção”(Nunes, 1988, p.32). In literature, the fictionalization of facts builds a world that escapes any kind of empirical confirmation, suggests Benedito Nunes, adding that, in history, the documents, signs of a real world, refer to facts that happened in the past, but these facts are confirmed only by inference and by the reconstruction of that world, and therefore also escape empirical evidence. However, a distinction between the two fields is established when he quotes

Collingwood: “Enquanto obras de imaginação, não diferem os trabalhos do historiador e do romancista. Diferem enquanto a imaginação do historiador pretende ser verdadeira.”(Apud Nunes, 1988, p.12). This difference is posited by Morrison when she says that her aim as a novelist is not to be faithful to true facts, but to draw implications from those facts, to explore all the possibilities offered by them in terms of literary creations.

Carr, in discussing the specificity of historical facts, notes that they do not speak for themselves. Facts only speak when the historian gives them voice. It is the historian who decides which facts are important and in what order and context they are so. The selectivity of the historian is closely linked to his conception of History and this depends upon the knowledge he has about the world. As Carr explains, this knowledge “has been pre-selected and predetermined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving”(Carr, 1961, p.12).

Linda Hutcheon expresses a similar thought when she analyses Michael Coetzee’s novel *Foe* as a literary work characteristic of postmodernism. In her study Hutcheon suggests that Coetzee tried to show how the historian and the story writer have similar attitudes in terms of selectivity: “*Foe* revela que os contadores de histórias podem certamente silenciar, excluir e eliminar certos acontecimentos - e pessoas - do passado, mas também sugere que os

historiadores fizeram o mesmo: nas tradicionais histórias do século XVIII, onde estão as mulheres?”(Hutcheon, 1991, p.143). To sum up, one could argue, as Carr does, for Professor Barraclough’s view of History: “the history we read, though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments”(Carr, 1961, p.13). Tony Morrison, by reconstructing artistically the history of African-Americans, reverts some accepted judgements that are related to the black female. However, if Morrison’s novel can be read as the reconstruction of a moment in historical African-American past, one cannot forget that this reconstruction is made in terms of a literary work and not in the modes of a historical document. Morrison’s aim was not to discuss history from the point of view of History itself, but to write artistically about a moment in History. Moreover, by reconstructing the Middle Passage (the African slaves’ crossing of the Atlantic to America in overcrowded ships) and its aftermath, the author provides a literary written record from the point of view of those “sixty million and more” who suffered it in physical, spiritual and emotional terms and who were not included as subjects in traditional American History.

The facts we know about History are never pure since they are always “refracted through the minds of the recorder” (Carr, 1961, p.24). Like Ernest J. Gaines’ protagonist in **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman**, the professor who teaches history and tries to collect and rearrange the facts of Miss Jane’s life, the historian collects and interprets the facts that he thinks are worth

selecting. In Gaines's novel, one can see how deeply History and Literature are related to one another. **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman** is the story of a 110 year- old black woman, Miss Jane Pittman, who reports the incidents of her life during slavery and after emancipation, up to the militancy of the sixties. A summary of the history of black people in America accompanies the description of Miss Jane's movement from slavery to freedom. The word "autobiography" in the title tries to establish a connection between the true history of a person's life, Miss Jane, and the craft of the writer. Moreover, when Miss Jane tells her story to the History teacher she is also being selective, recollecting facts that marked her past. Her telling and her selection, however, is a communal activity since it is made with the help of other people who live with her and who know her story. Besides Miss Jane's and her friends' selectivity, the story she reports will be filtered once more, this time by the professor's interpretation of the facts. Miss Jane and other characters talk about her/their recollections. These are rearranged because the teacher states, in the introduction of the book, that there were times in which he could not write everything that Miss Jane and the others said because "it was too repetitious and did not follow a single direction" (Gaines, 1971, p.vii).

Although the novel recounts Miss Jane's life using the first person narration, we know that she is telling the story to the History teacher, and therefore, he is the one who reorganizes the loose events of her past life. The novel examines the problematic craft of the historian in the filtering and

interpretation of facts, and because this is a fictional work, the novel establishes a connection, an interrelationship, between the work of the historian and of the fictional writer. When the History teacher made the first contact with Miss Jane he was asked about the American History books: "What's wrong with them books you already got?", said Mary, Miss Jane's friend, to which he replied "Miss Jane is not in them" (Gaines, 1971, p.vi). Through the voice of the History teacher, Gaines states his reason for writing the book: the attempt to write the History of the Blacks in America from the point of view of the common people, those who make everyday life bit by bit (great figures of Black American History are mentioned, but they only appear in background scenes).

A close examination of American Literary History leads to the conclusion that it is strongly linked to traditional American History. Houston Baker examines the question of discourse in American History and Literature based on Barthes's formulation of history as discourse and on Foucault's archaeology of knowledge. For Baker, as well as for Barthes, the truth of the historical discourse becomes an elusive matter because, as Barthes writes in his essay "Historical Discourse", "the only feature which distinguishes historical discourse from other kinds is a paradox: the 'fact' can only exist linguistically, as a term in a discourse, yet we behave as if it were a simple reproduction of something on another plane of existence altogether, some extra-structural 'reality' "(Baker, 1985, p.22). History, being a discourse, is made up of governing statements, and these are always

directed by ideologies. According to Foucault, the statement is the fundamental unit of discourse, and we should analyze it taking into account the discursive constellation from which it evolves. Therefore “we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence, determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlation with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes”(Foucault Apud Baker, 1985, p.18).

Based on Foucault’s and Barthes’s thesis, Baker analyses terms such as “religious man”, “wilderness”, “migratory errand”, “increase in store”, and “New Jerusalem”, terms that have characterized the life and literature of American people since the beginning of colonization and became “governing structures of a traditional American history”(Baker, 1985, p.19). These statements contrast to and exclude African-American people. If, as Baker argues, the European “religious man” came to the New World spontaneously in search of a “New Jerusalem”, the black people came to America as “commercial deportation”, as commercial objects tossed away in an Armageddonian site.

The fact that the European man came to America by free choice to conquer the New World convinced that he was bringing salvation to the “savages” who lived in it established a pattern of assumptions that led to centuries of exclusion of people who did not fit into the European conception of the “religious man”. Non-Europeans were considered savage, wild, less than human. The dominance and

power of the European man in the New World can be summed up in Marlow's words (Joseph Conrad's protagonist in **Heart of Darkness**) about European colonialism:¹

It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind - as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much . . . (Conrad, 1989, p.31-32)

Avoiding to look into History from the perspective of the excluded, traditional History was, and still is, centered in and subordinated to the views and needs of the dominant stratum of society. Traditional American Literary History is a branch of American History, argues Houston Baker, and being so, it reflects the patterns and the statements that governed the immigration and development of European men in the American continent (Baker, 1985, p.19). Following Baker's argument, one can say that American Literature has been "perpetuating literary workers and works of art that manifest adherence to the original errand - securing a New Jerusalem"(Baker, 1985, p.21). American literary history was based on the founding myths of the Puritans who came to America in search of a place in

¹ Although Conrad's novel is set in Africa, Marlow's indictment of colonialism applies to all the places the Europeans set out to conquer.

which they could find religious freedom, in search of a New Jerusalem in which they could secure their strict religious code, beliefs and morals. Anyone who would not fit the categories imposed by their beliefs was considered a savage, an inferior being and therefore, did not deserve the same status as they did. Masked behind the argument that they were bringing religious salvation, civilization and progress to the wild inhabitants of the New World was the white European men's desire to conquer the other, to guarantee their power and dominance.

Foucault's archaeology of knowledge makes one consider the statement in relation to the discursive constellation of its time, thus providing new ways of interpreting historical and literary discourses. Toni Morrison is an African-American writer who succeeds in shaking the discursive formation around the idea of "New Jerusalem" in terms of literary creation. One means she found to deal artistically with this and with subject matters related to slavery and the status given to African-American people is by employing the device of Magic Realism.

2.3 Magic Realism and Morrison's *Beloved*

As Linden Peach suggests, the term Magic Realism is problematic, first because it has not been clearly defined and second because it is sometimes mixed up with "other literary concepts such as fabulation, the fantastic, the uncanny" (Peach, 1995, p.12). The term, which is itself representative of a dialectical

relation, that of magic and reality, was first applied to German post-expressionistic painting by the historian and art critic Franz Roh in 1925. Through the book **Nach Expressionismus (Magischer Realismus)** Roh aims to capture a moment in German painting in which the artists tried to represent the material things in order to make their hidden mysteries visible. Irleamar Chiampi writes about Roh's dual purpose in the characterization of the German pictorial production of the twenties as magic realist:

Em algumas passagens Roh deixa supor a idéia de uma realidade miraculosa *em si*, produzida pela persistência e duração de certos objetos, em meio à constante dissolução e mutação do universo. Mas o que lhe interessava postular como mágico era antes o *ato de percepção* do que a qualidade essencial do mundo objetivo. O papel do artista seria, assim, o de associar objetos específicos, conferindo-lhes um estatuto paradigmático, pelo controle da sua subjetividade deformadora. (Chiampi, 1980, p.22)

Although Roh gave some credit to the thought that things could have mysteries characteristic of their own at certain moments, his ideas about magic realism were related more to the phenomenological act of perceiving the mysterious than to the ontological status of things. Roh's ideas had a great repercussion in the works of Latin American writers. Arturo Uslar Pietri was the first to incorporate the term into Latin American literary criticism in 1948 in his study about Venezuelan short stories. Six years later Angel Flores published an article applying the term to the work of Borges. In 1949 the Cuban writer Alejo

Carpentier, based on the history of Haiti, published the novel **El Reino de Este Mundo** in which he concentrates on the union of different elements that came from heterogeneous cultures that form “uma nova realidade histórica, que subverte os padrões convencionais da racionalidade ocidental” (Chiampi, 1980, p.32). Carpentier’s vision of this “new historical reality” relied largely on the possibilities offered by literature. Carpentier’s definition of the concept of the novel, as argued by Antonio Fama, was based on “una continua interacción entre sincronía y diacronía, entre elementos propriamente literarios, estilísticos, estruturales, temáticos etc. y elementos extra-literarios que influyen en la producción y recepción de la obra, y que la novela auspicia una pluralidad de elementos, tanto contemporáneos como históricos.” (Fama, 1991, p.135). The prologue of Carpentier’s novel, in which critics find many points of affiliation with Breton’s Surrealism, became a kind of declaration of the constitutive elements of the new Latin American literary production. In the prologue Carpentier defines the *real maravilhoso*, a term that he thought was better than Magic Realism. Carpentier’s *marvelous real* is constituted by two levels of definition. One is related to the modes of perception; the other is the relationship between the text and the marvelous American reality:

... o real maravilhoso começa a sê-lo de maneira inequívoca quando surge de uma inesperada alteração da realidade (o milagre), de uma revelação privilegiada da realidade, de uma

iluminação não habitual ou particularmente favorecedora das desconhecidas riquezas da realidade, de uma ampliação das escalas e categorias da realidade, percebidas com especial intensidade em virtude de uma exaltação do espírito que o conduz a um modo de “estado-limite”. (Carpentier, 1987, p.140)

With the novels of Gabriel Garcia Márquez in the sixties a new synthesis is achieved in the Magic Realist Latin American fiction. According to Frederic Jameson, this new kind of synthesis shows “a transfigured object world in which fantastic events are *also* narrated (Jameson, 1986, p.301). Nevertheless, as Jameson points out, recent debates have pointed to another level of magic realism, that of the political or mystificatory value. The term mystificatory here refers to the act of using language saying one thing but meaning another in a deeper level; that is, the use of a masked language, one that only the people who are living under the imposition of certain systems of oppression are able to understand.

In a lecture at Universidade Federal do Paraná on April 18, 1997, the Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar argued that some Latin American writers employed magic realism as a way to circumvent the censorship and political repression of their countries’ dictatorships. An example of this kind of magic realism is found in Julio Cortázar’s work. In his short-story **A Casa Ocupada**, he writes about two people (brother and sister) who live in a house in which a mysterious presence starts making noises in one part of the house. This unknown

presence gradually takes possession of the house and the two members of the family have to move out, room by room, until they are turned out of the house by the back door. One interesting point in this short-story is that the members of the family do not call into question the unknown presence, neither seek plausible explanations for it. The presence is just there, like a ghost, and they move out until there is no place they could call their own. One possible interpretation for the short story could be the power of the unknown, mysterious forces of repression that occupy your “house” and force you to “move out”, the last two words connoting death, exile, abandonment, dispossession, and similar consequences common to the fate of so many Latin Americans.

2.3 The Mystificatory value: Magic Realism and African-American culture

According to Scliar, Cortázar used magic realism as a way to talk about issues that otherwise he could not write about under a repressive government. The mystificatory value Jameson ascribes to more recent literary texts that employ Magic Realism can also be detected in the songs and stories of slaves. As representatives of cultures silenced by the slave system, black slaves developed a hidden level of signification that manifests itself in the slavequarters, in their stories and songs.

The oral quality one finds in the encantatory language of black stories is something Morrison tries to catch in her work. The specificity of Black culture

lies mainly in the oral quality that was kept and transmitted generation after generation in black communities. These communities employed fantasy and magic as sources of creation and innovation in their communal stories. We have to consider that Morrison writes from within an African-American tradition in which fantasy and magic play a great part, and despite the fact that she dislikes having her work described as Magic Realist, one could argue that her work does have some characteristics of Magic Realism. Isabel Allende's definition of Magic Realism may clarify why this term was applied to Morrison's work:

Magic realism really means allowing a place in literature to the invisible forces that have such a powerful place in life... dreams, myth, legend, passion, obsession, superstition, religion, the overwhelming power of nature and the supernatural. All these are present in African poetry, Hindu sagas, Arab tales, and used to be present in Western literature up to the Gothic novel and Edgar Allan Poe. Only in the past few decades have they been excluded by white male authors who decided that whatever cannot be controlled doesn't exist. (Allende Apud Peach, 1995, p.12)

2.5 Magic Realism and Hybridism

If we take into consideration Isabel Allende's definition of the term, we see that there are many Magic Realist features in Morrison's **Beloved**, as for example, the obsession with the past and with nurturing that permeates the development of the narrative and the supernatural presence of the ghost that

haunts the house in which Sethe and her family live, and later, the mysterious woman that appears at the front porch of the house or the conversations Sethe and her daughter Denver usually have with the dead grandmother, Baby Suggs. Morrison herself relates magic not only to her artistic work, but also to her “real” life as she said in an interview that she “grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority they talked about what “really” happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable” (Davis, 1993, p.415). Some critics analyze Morrison’s work either as characteristic of the Black folk tradition or as a creation that goes against the traditional Western literary works. Others classify her writing as sharing characteristics with Magic Realism. In this study we will avoid these distinctions. We think it would be more profitable to see Morrison’s writing as of a syncretic nature that encompasses the hybridism of African-American language and culture and of her personal literary background.

Besides the magical tradition of Morrison’s African ancestry, one can argue that Morrison, being a writer, an editor, and an American intellectual may have been unconsciously influenced by the aesthetic discussions of her own time and by the boom of the Latin American fiction of the sixties and seventies. Latin American Magic Realist fiction represents an alternative way of writing in relation to the North American tendency towards Naturalism in fiction.

Morrison's position as a writer is characteristic of that of many other black writers in the United States. She writes from within a double heritage: the African-American cultural tradition and the influences she had as an American intellectual. The African-American cultural tradition is neither African nor American, but a culture that grew out of the blending of African and American cultural aspects. From the perspective of the African-American writer, Morrison employed many literary strategies that recover the richness of black folk culture with its myths, fantasies and beliefs. The belief in ghosts and in their interference in the lives of black people, for example, is strong in African culture. However, Morrison does not work with the Black folk tradition in the same way as other black writers do. Let's take Zora Neale Hurston, for example. Hurston writes about the magical power of Hoodoo, witchcraft and conjuration using black vernacular speech and rituals to talk about the personal development of a black woman called Janie in **Their Eyes Were Watching God**. The difference between, say, Zora Neale Hurston's and Morrison's use of the black folk tradition is that Morrison does not link magic specifically to folkloric characterization. Instead, the use of magic and fantasy in Morrison seems linked more to aspects that relate to the work of Latin American writers, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. And here comes the second aspect of Morrison's double heritage, the fact of being an intellectual who is always in contact with other

writers, who is aware of the situation of Black people in the United States and who, as editor and reader, has been in contact with a great variety of texts.

We cannot forget that Morrison, in her path from reader to editor to writer, has been in contact with different thoughts and literary strategies and techniques. It is not absurd to say that she probably has been influenced by the work of some writers and by the readings she has done. Morrison does not deny the influence of the great masters, such as William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf on her work, but she does not like to have her work analyzed in comparison to the white literary imagination. What she longs for is to have a critical reading of her books which would take into account that they were written within the specific tradition of African-American culture.

Although critics have to take into consideration the specificity of Morrison's social and cultural background, one could say that Morrison's books, more specifically *Beloved*, show some similarities with the work of Latin American writers. The existence of a ghost character who traces back the history of a people in *Beloved* reminds us of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. Garcia Marquez is a Magic Realist writer. We do not want to argue that Morrison writes exclusively as a Magic Realist. Instead we want to suggest that one can find similarities in *Beloved*'s narrative strategies and Magic Realism. Basically, the term "Magic realism" refers to those works in which the magical world is part of the "real" world without antagonisms. Generally, in

Magic Realist texts, the unbelievable is part of the natural world, so that ghosts appear and inhabit the houses and communicate with human beings, which is not considered shocking or frightening by the people who live in the community in which the event occurs.

Similarly, in **Beloved**, we find a baby ghost who “has a powerful spell” and interferes in the lives of those who stay at 124 Bluestone Road. This ghost later comes to the place in the form of a sensuous woman who traces back the historical movement of black people from Africa to the United States, reliving the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage and dealing more specifically with the roles and relationships of black mothers and daughters. Perhaps the similarities between **Beloved** and Magic Realist texts derive from the African heritage itself. In African cultures, there is not a strict adherence to a rational, positivist way of apprehending the world as we find in Europe. Instead, the distinctions between the rational and magical worlds are blurred.

The African-American blurring of boundaries in story-telling is similar to that of Latin America. Many Latin American story-tellers and novelists, from Carpentier to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, reproduce in their writings the idea that in Latin America the “real” is “marvelous”, that is, the reality of their lives is so closely linked to magic and fantasy that it is impossible to dissociate one from the other. Similarly, in African-American story-telling, which is inherited in the stories and songs that were kept by ancestors, magical events are part of

everyday life, and so, it is difficult to say where the “real” world ends and the magical one begins. Therefore, both in the case of African American and Latin American story-telling the “real” would also be “magic”.

2.6 Magic Realism as supplementation

Another possibility to explain why Morrison has resorted to Magic Realist strategies in her novels could be the case of supplementation. Since American literature has followed a strong Realist-Naturalist vein, Morrison, by using elements of Magic Realism, establishes and marks the difference of her work from the mainstream literature. In this case, her writings occupy the position of the Other; that is, a literature that diverges from the forms and ideas imposed by the white literary imagination. It is not an alternative way of writing that Morrison employs for she, as other African-American writers, is part of the Euro-American literary tradition, too. Instead, she could have used Magic Realism to supplement the spaces that were left by Realist-Naturalistic conventions. Realism, due to the difference between American and African-American ways of narrating the world, is not an adequate means to tell the stories of the African-Americans. The reality of slavery and racism is so absurd and unaccountable that authors have to resort to other ways of telling. This is to say that, in fact, another “reality” or another level of reality, has to be created in order to grasp that specific condition.

Magic Realism, therefore, seems to suit Morrison's, and also other writers' ways of telling their stories because it gives them other possibilities to work with a "reality" that cannot be narrated through the straightjacket of Realist-Naturalist conventions. Also, Magic Realism helps Morrison to establish herself as the literary Other, as a writer who struggles to find another voice, a voice different from those that fit the mainstream tradition in American literature. By speaking figuratively through Magic Realism, Morrison was able to find another way of telling the history and the absurdities of the reality experienced by Black people during slavery and its aftermath. In Magic Realist texts the lines that separate what we conceive as the "real" and the magical worlds are not clearly distinct. They are not autonomous worlds. Instead, the boundaries that divide these two worlds are fluid and interactive, and perhaps this fluidity and this interaction can help readers achieve a somewhat deeper level of the textual and the social realities that the author tries to recover.

The literary critic Scott Simpkins argues that Magic Realism can be used as a supplementation of Realism. For Simpkins, the linguistic medium used in all texts is the source of difficulty, and, although the use of magic realism "appears to overcome the 'limits' of realism, it can succeed only partially because of the frustrating inadequacies of language" (Simpkins, 1988, p.140). Since realism, as Gabriel Garcia Márquez states, is a "kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality" (Apud Simpkins, 1988, p.143), writers

have tried to create texts using magical strategies in order to capture the reality which is, according to Garcia Márquez, “in itself out of all proportion. Disproportion is part of our [Latin American] reality too”.(Simpkins, 1988, p.144).

Garcia Márquez explains that he “was able to write **One Hundred Years of Solitude** simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists or Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand (Apud Simpkins, 1988, p.144). Garcia Márquez uses magic supplemental strategies in order to “increase the significative force texts seem able to generate” (Simpkins, 1988, p.143). Realistic texts are, therefore, too limited to represent reality, and as Garcia Márquez adds “however good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page” (Simpkins, 1988, p.143). Both the mystificatory value characteristic of black oral tradition, and the narrative strategies of Magic Realism are part of Morrison’s literary work, not to mention that her books never end on the last page for there is always something left. Perhaps a good reason for Morrison’s circular and unfinished endings is Mary’s saying in **The autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman**: “. . . you don’t tie up all the loose ends all the time” (Gaines, 1971, p.vii).

2.7 Stretching the borders: Magic Realism, violence, and a history with holes

If the definitions given to Magic Realism up to now seem to fit the novels written by Morrison, Frederic Jameson's analysis of magic realism in film could point out to another aspect that deepens the signification of the use of magical realism. In his essay Jameson isolates three components of film narrative that he examines in three films and which seem to him as constitutive of "a certain magic realism": history, color, and attention to violence. Jameson noticed that they "are all *historical* films; the very different *color* of each constitutes a unique supplement and the resource of a peculiar pleasure, or fascination, or *jouissance*, in its own right; in each, finally, the dynamic of *narrative* has somehow been reduced, concentrated, and simplified, by the attention to violence (and, to a lesser degree, sexuality)." (Jameson, 1986, p.303).

Despite the different mediums employed by literature and film, the three aspects mentioned by Jameson could be related to **Beloved**. First, Morrison's novel evokes history when it discusses slavery in the South, the Underground Railroad, the Middle-Passage, Abolitionism in the North and the status given to black people. Second, in terms of color, **Beloved** shows a uniqueness of visual perceptions, specially in relation to the white man, who is referred to as "man without skin" and to the lack of color that permeates the novel. Third, **Beloved** is somehow concentrated on the violent acts committed against black people during and after slavery, extrapolating the physical pain and reaching levels of

unimagined psychological and social damage. Although there are no studies to confirm if there is really a connection between violent historical periods and the use of magic realism in the literature that has originated in or refers to those periods, one could suggest, reading Jameson's analysis, that certain historical moments and events are so unreasonable that only a resorting to magic and to the supernatural seems to provide a fair account of them.

Another point worth pursuing in Jameson's analysis is that when he mentions the historical quality of what he considers Magic Realist films, he associates it not to traditional History, but to a "history with holes, perforated history, which includes gaps not immediately visible to us..." (Jameson, 1986, p.303). **Beloved**, in this case, is a "history with holes" in that it is an attempt to recollect the fragmented history of Black people in order to fill in those gaps left by traditional History and, in this aspect, it is similar to post-colonial literature. Such literature try to minimize the marks established by History and attempt to narrate a different history, one hidden in the silence of the oppressed, through the search of signifiers different from those imposed by the white Euro-American man and which could redefine the time and space lost in the past.

According to Maria Nazareth Soares Fonseca in her study of the relationship between Literature and History, in the literature of some colonized countries, the desire to fill in these spaces shows the closeness between the two fields, and the search for the lost time and original space is part of the need a

people bereft of an identity have in order to nominate themselves and to establish their own identity. It is particularly interesting to notice that the formal transgressions brought about by some novels written as a means to assert a particular identity and/or as a reaction to the power imposed by the colonizer express the link between Literature and History. In **Mayombe**, a novel written by the Angolan Pepetela, and **Texaco**, a work of the Martiniquean Patrick Chamoiseau, Fonseca points out that there is an intense dialogue between historical facts and oral history in which voices from the minority disturb the discourse of the dominators. And this is made with the active participation of the reader, thus offering the possibility of extrapolating the literary achievement: “a intervenção dos diversos narradores dilacera a unidade monológica e tece uma rede de opiniões e de pontos de vista que possibilita a manifestação ativa do leitor, que se torna participante do diálogo deflagrado pelo texto, intencionado em transformar o ato de escrever em transgressão, em possibilidade de se ir além das páginas do romance.” (Fonseca, 1997, p.94).

Still more enlightening is the analysis of the reception of **Texaco** both in France and in the Antilles. According to Fonseca, the French critics were specially concerned about the classification of the novel trying to show its historical connections or its inventions of language. The Antillean critics, on the other hand, perceived the novel as a deep act of communication with the country

and a social and mythological reality which expresses a different perception of the world. As she summarizes:

Percebe-se, na recepção do romance, o desencontro entre duas mentalidades, entre modos diferentes de percepção de mundo. O leitor francês da metrópole alicerça seu raciocínio na compartimentação de áreas do conhecimento; o antilhano, percebe as ambigüidades, as extravagâncias textuais como próprias a uma realidade que se exhibe em paradoxos, em contradições significativas.” (Fonseca, 1997, p.95)

Although it is not my aim to look at Morrison’s work as post-colonial literature, it shares some concerns and techniques with those authors mentioned above. She evokes real facts, but not just facts. She gives voice to sensations, too. They are not just rational accounts, but sensitive images that evoke pain, loss, bewilderment, anger, hunger, passion and oppression. And perhaps that is why her work shares some features with Magic Realism. Besides, magic can be a means of working with the unsaid, the untold, the silence lived by a people whose history was erased.

Chapter III

SLAVE NARRATIVES:

Development and consequences on the representation of Black women in literature

The slave woman ought not be judged by the same standards as others.

-Harriet Jacobs, **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**

3.1 Personal accounts as communal utterance

Slave narratives are known as the Black people's personal accounts of the terrible conditions of enslavement in the American Continent. Great part of these narratives were written in the form of autobiographies by African and African-American slaves. As Henry Louis Gates observes, what is peculiar in such narratives in The United States is that they were written within the institution of slavery. Once the slaves who fled the South were free and safe in the North, they were encouraged by Northern abolitionists to testify against the system that regarded them as property and caused them physical and psychological harm. Additionally, the slave writers were prompted to urge freedom and literacy for those who were still in bondage. A strong connection between literacy and freedom was stated not only in slave narratives but also in essays, stories and

interviews given by those who once were slaves. Those who wrote asserted in their narratives how much literacy helped to trace their path to freedom. Frederick Douglass, for example, wrote in the narrative of his life that when his master Mr. Auld discovered that Mrs. Auld was teaching him how to read, he prohibited his wife to proceed because “learning would spoil the best nigger in the world”. Douglass writes that “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass, 1987, p.275). Thus, literacy helped in the process of achieving freedom, for it allowed the slaves not only to have a deeper understanding of how things worked in the white man’s world, but also allowed black ex-slave authors to expose the incongruities and aberrations of the slave system. Literacy in the hands of black people became a powerful weapon in the fight against slavery.

Through the written accounts the ex-slaves were able to condemn the enslavers and the system that legitimated their enslavement. These narratives ended up being very similar in content and form. Gates argues that the recurrent pattern of the slave narratives was a result of “readings and rereadings” of stories written by preceding slave authors (Gates, 1987, p.X). This means that before writing their own biographies, the ex-slave writers observed carefully the content and the structure of the narratives that already existed, and adapted the incidents of their lives to the previous structures they had examined.

Gates points out that “the Black slave’s narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual’s autobiography.” (Gates, 1987, p.X). Therefore, one can say that through imitation and repetition the black slave narrators, perhaps unconsciously, were able to keep in the written form the communal sense characteristic of their oral tradition. Each ex-slave who wrote his or her story was also writing as a representative of those who were still captive and were not allowed to speak for themselves. For an ex-slave writer it was a great responsibility to have thousands of black people in bondage being judged in terms of “character, integrity, intelligence, manners and morals, and their claims to warrant emancipation”(Gates, 1987, p.X) through his or her personal written account. The ex-slave authors were very careful in their writing in order to achieve a point in which they could be able to transform the events of their lives into a comprehensive and convincing pattern and simultaneously prove that every other black slave had the same potentiality for learning and the same longing for freedom.

Despite the difficulties, the ex-slave writers succeeded in their task and created what critics today recognize as the beginnings of the Afro-American tradition in literature. Gates points out the unusual origin of this literary tradition in that it was developed as a refutation of the claim that black slaves were not able to write. The slave narratives proved the claim to be wrong, achieving a great popularity among readers and establishing the basis for African-American

fictional and non-fictional writings. In fact, many Afro-American writers acknowledge the slave narratives as the sources of their creation. This is the case for both male and female writers such as W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, to name just a few.

For black people in America, and for black literary authors, the slave narratives are a hallmark of identity. In spite of being strongly influenced by the standards of the white dominant society of the times, these narratives are the closest testimony black people have of the history and the literary creations of their ancestors. Raimond Hedin explains very well why the black writer had to submit to such influences: “in order to have their desired effect of discrediting slavery and of moving their readers to abolish it, the ex-slaves who wrote the narratives of their former lives needed to use arguments the predominantly white audience would find compelling and to shift their emphasis as readers shifted pre-occupations.”(Hedin, 1982, p.631). The slave writings, then, were not so much directed to the black audience as to the white dominant society. Another point raised by Hedin is that of the submission to Northern editors. In order to get their stories published the ex-slaves had to submit to the thoughts and ideas of those editors, who certainly “suppressed certain unmentionables” of the slave narratives.(Hedin, 1982, p.632). However, this does not mean that the slave

writers were passive assimilators of the form and content of their master's literary world. As Hedin points out, "to use arguments suitable to one's particular audience is the mark of a skillful writer"(Hedin, 1982, p.632). And, being skillful, the black writers knew that they would not be accepted and understood if they included tales and images characteristic of their African tradition. They, therefore, managed to manipulate the "existing arguments and narrative modes" in a way that does not imitate the white master, but instead, subverts him (Hedin, 1982, p.632).

In tracing the development of the slave narratives, Hedin argues that the first narratives, written during the eighteenth century, were not as heavily influenced by society's morals and customs as those who came later. Although there is a conjunction between the first slave narratives and the beginnings of the abolitionist movement; that is, there is a simultaneity in the beginnings of these narratives and the development of abolitionist ideas in the eighteenth century, the movement was not as powerful as it would become during the nineteenth century. Besides this, the first slave narrators were Africans, in their majority, and had not yet cut entirely their cultural and stylistic links with their native lands. This fact would make the narratives vary in form and shift in emphasis and voice.

3.2 The picaresque and the change of its conventions in slave narratives

The slave narratives of the eighteenth century were very similar to the traditional picaresque novel. The picaresque novel originated in Spain and it was “an early form of the novel, usually a first-person narrative, relating to adventures of a rogue or lowborn adventurer (Spanish: *pícaro*) who drifts from place to place and from one social milieu to another in an effort to survive” (Merriam Webster’s **Encyclopedia of Literature**, 1995, p.881). Nevertheless, as Hedin explains, the resemblance between the slaves’ narratives and the picaresque novel was less in the writers’ intention to arrange the incidents of their lives in a way that could fit a literary form than in a natural conjunction between the slaves’ daily experiences and the picaresque mode. Hedin justifies his argument:

The slaves who became narrators in this period led surprisingly autonomous, or at least semi-autonomous, lives. Like the *pícaro*, they were often adventurous, not just in the act of escape (as later narrators would be) but throughout their lives. Confronted by a hard world without institutions to offer them shelter - not even a plantation in many cases - some of them converted to Christianity. Most of them hardened themselves and acted as individualistically and asocially as circumstances would allow. In short, their narratives were picaresque because their lives were picaresque. (Hedin, 1982 ,p.633)

Therefore, although elements of the anti-slavery cause are part of these narratives, they seem to be not as evident as in those narratives that came between 1820 and 1830. During these ten years the narratives were written

mostly by male and female writers who were born in American plantations, sons and daughters of African slaves, and many times children whose fathers were white masters. Both physically and psychologically these ex-slaves underwent the worst conditions of existence. Thus, the narratives of this period sought to put an end to the institution that pervaded black people's lives with affliction and humiliation. This specific aim was found in less degree in the narratives of the earlier generations of slaves. As a result, the "range of observation, like the choice of the narrative mode, now became weighted; both had to be appropriate to the purpose of discrediting slavery" (Hedin, 1982, p.634).

Since the goal of these ex-slave writers was to contribute to the abolition of slavery, and the best way to do it was to convince the white society of their time to help them in the fight, they had to concentrate their energies in the form, language and content that was most appropriate to that specific society. During the slavery debate of 1830 the argument for morality, which claimed that slavery was a moral error, came to its highest point, and was employed as a justification for the abolition of slavery. WM. Lloyd Garrison's words in the preface to the **Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass**, "No compromise with slavery! No union with slaveholders!" marked the radical abolitionist rhetoric that would follow.

As Hiden points out, the argument for morality brought about by the abolitionist movement influenced the development of the slave narratives in many

ways. First, slavery was to be shown as a perverted system that corrupted everyone who approached it or lived under it. Frederick Douglass states this point very clearly when he mentions the transformation of his kind mistress into an evil woman after her marriage to a slave owner: slavery, “the fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (Gates, 1987, p.274). Other authors share the same view: J.W.C. Pennington voices that “masters are not masters of the system. The system is the master of them...” (Apud Hiden, 1982, p.635); Harriet Jacobs, in **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**, sees slavery as a poisonous serpent. Thus, as Hedin asserts, “the slave narrators maintain a subtle and compassionate stance as well as an absolute moral distinction; it is not that they see evil everywhere, it is that the system produces evil everywhere.”(Hedin, 1982, p.635)

A second point that modified the development of the slave narratives was related to the depiction of the slaves' behavior. In depicting the horrors of slavery, the narrators worked with the effects of the slave system both on the master's and on the slave's behavior. Once the radicalism of the anti-slavery cause started to demand a strictly correct behavior on the part of the victims, the ex-slave writer had to review the picaresque characteristic of the early narratives.

Nat Turner's 1831 revolt¹ had complicated the matter as it aroused fear of rebellion in the South. As a result, means of oppression increased in Southern plantations, diminishing the rights and legal recourses of slaves. Consequently, more and more slaves who felt the system was unbearable attempted to flight to the North. In the process of escape slaves had to use all their skills, including deceit and violent acts when necessary.

After 1831, in an attempt to avoid a confrontation between the depiction of the faults slaves had to commit during their escapes and the moral argument of the abolitionist movement, the slave writers had to change the conventions of the picaresque, searching for strategies that would keep morality on their side while describing events and actions that were considered highly questionable or immoral. Arguments with racist assumptions that began to be spread by pro-slavery Southerners complicated the issue. The argument in favor of slavery claimed that "blacks were subhuman, biologically inferior, hence naturally and rightly subordinate to whites" (Hiden, 1982, p.636). The argument that slaves were brutish was used specially to discredit the anti-slavery movement. For, if slaves were considered inferior and brutish, and therefore had to be subordinated to their masters, who were considered morally and intellectually superior, it would be a danger for the white men's society to have such brutish people out of

¹ Nat Turner: an American slave who led a violent rebellion in Virginia and was hanged for it.

the white men's restraint. The fear that slaves, once free and owners of their own destinies, might outburst with feelings of revenge and be dangerous to the white men's safety spread both in the North and South. This helped to create a negative effect in the reception of the anti-slavery cause, and if slave narrators were not careful in their writings, their fight for freedom could lose support. In such a context, "the slave narrator had not only to defend his morality but his humanity (read rationality) all the while describing how he lied, stole, and even fought and killed his way to freedom" (Hedin, 1982, p.637).

The manipulation of the collective fear of black revolts altered the fragile relationships between whites and blacks. White masters demanded more and more obedience and increased their ways of punishment. Meanwhile, blacks employed all their strength and skills to survive such a period. As the pressure upon black people's restraint increased, escape acquired a new status, seeming the only way out to black people. Since escape represented a financial loss and a contest of the white men's power, the masters undertook all efforts to recapture their slaves. The slaves, on the other hand, in their attempt to be free, had to take great risks, and, not rarely, had to fight violently in order to achieve their freedom. As slave writers wrote their autobiographies, they increased the details of descriptions that focused on their oppressive situation and on their struggle to escape.

In order to justify their offenses and to convince their white audiences that they were human beings guided by morals and by reason, and not by compassion, the slave narrators employed new tactics of narration. One of them was to show the slave system as the cause of their offensive acts. As Hedin reminds us, the slave writers explained that they acted as they did because “there was no other recourse within such a system” (Hedin, 1982, p.638). Another technique the slave narrators used was to argue that slavery was a corrupt system that influenced not only the behavior of white masters but also of their black victims. They complained that if they acted as beasts it was because slavery had bestialized them, and not the other way around.

Despite the conventions and the morals to which the slaves had to submit in order to convince the white society that slavery was an evil to be banished from American society, the slave narrators managed to succeed in their task. As Hedin points out, “the slave narrators accepted certain ground rules and worked within them”, but quickly and skillfully they turned these rules into advantage (Hedin, 1982, p.639). One point in which the slave narrators proved to be very careful and skillful was in relation to violence done in the process of escape. Slave writers knew that violence could arouse fear in the white readers and could also link the slaves’ character to immorality and brutality. Therefore, in passages that depicted their escape, they presented violence as unavoidable and necessary acts, a way of self-defense and not a characteristic of black people. Since

violence is related to brutes, and slave narrators were trying to prove that they did not belong to such a class of beings, they managed “to show that even these most violent actions rested upon ineluctable, rational choice” (Hedin, 1982, p.639). That is why in the depiction of a violent moment during escape, the slave writers tried to show that their acts were guided by reason and not by instinct, and in moments of confrontation, the slaves emphasized their rational control.

In the narratives that were written after 1840 another argument was added to the religious and rational morality that was already employed. This new argument had as the basis for its reasoning the principles of the American and the French revolutions, and also the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Freedom, the natural right of every man, became an appealing point in favor of the abolition of slavery. As Andrew Jackson wrote in his narrative:

I was after a prize, for which I was willing to risk my life. And I doubt not, any one who reads this, would have done the same. And if it was right for the revolutionary patriots to fight for liberty, it was right for me, and it is right for any other slave to do the same. And were I now a slave, I would risk my life for freedom. “Give me liberty or give me death”, would be my deliberate conclusion (Apud Hedin, 1982, p.640).

Drawing on the arguments of the revolutionary cause for independence, the slaves were able to reinforce the notion that liberty was not only a right but also a

duty. “the highest duty in fact, to which every other consideration became subordinate” (Hedin, 1982, p.641).

As we have seen, there were many factors which influenced the form, structure and the content of the slave narratives. The ex-slave authors, despite all these factors, were able to turn their audiences’ thoughts and ideas into arguments that would favor their fight for freedom. The conventionality of their form and their political content do not prevent these narratives from being considered as authentic accounts of life under enslavement. In fact, as Foster points out, “one of the most vital characteristics of slave narratives has been their claim to authenticity” and, if they do not provide the truth , they are “at least a true account of slavery and those enslaved” (Foster, 1978, p.845). Besides the fact that slave narratives are based on autobiographical accounts and documented facts and have a historical value that cannot be denied, one has to take into consideration that they are also the first literary written expression of black people in America and as so, they “comprise a distinct literary genre and this genre orders people and things according to its own conventions” (Foster, 1978, p.846).

Although slave narratives established peculiar prototypical patterns in terms of structure and theme, they helped to present a reality that was not only an individual’s experience but one that encompassed the experiences common to all kinds of slaves. These narratives have in common the likeness of plots, themes,

and characters as slave narratives were a means to meet the literary expectations and social attitudes of the audience. These expectations and attitudes influenced the manner in which the ex-slave narrators told their stories. As nineteenth-century readers had “rigid but naive ideas about race and slavery” the authors, in order to reach their audience, made use of simplifications and stereotypes (Foster, 1978, p.846).

3.3 The depiction of Black women in slave narratives: negative images of femininity?

Among these stereotypes, the depiction of the black female may be, as seen by Foster, one of the most destructive stereotypes found in slave narratives:

Slave narratives presented black women as so completely victimized that the experiences which slavery engendered and their ability to survive such experiences placed them outside what was accepted as the normal sphere of women. In particular, black women became identified with illicit sexual intercourse so strongly that this remains a dominant issue in American literature. (Foster, 1978, p.846)

The representation of black women in the American literature that was to come was, to a great extent, influenced by the images presented in slave narratives. As Foster explains in her study about the victimization of black females in slave narratives, women have been commonly defined in sexual terms

either in literary or social grounds. Frequently, the value and virtue of a woman has been measured by the manner in which she has used her capacity for reproduction. In literature, women have been represented in two major classes: “either far innocent princesses — objects to be protected from brutal lust and presented as treasures to one good man to have and to hold and to produce his offspring; or temptresses — sexually alluring but feared for their potential destructive power over men” (Foster, 1978, p.846). In traditional American literature the princess is associated to the white lady, and the temptress to the black woman.

The association of black women to sexuality is shown in slave narratives written both by black men and women. Olaudah Equiano, an African slave who worked for a slave trader, shows how African women were reduced to the level of sexual objects when he describes the behavior of the crew on his master’s trading ship:

While I was thus employed by my master, I was often a witness to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves. I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; . . . (Equiano, 1987, p.74)

Equiano could not help the slave girls who were brought to the vessels and who had to submit to such cruelties. He adds, "I have known our mates commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace not of Christians only, but of men. I have even know them gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old;"(Equiano, 1987, p.74).

According to Foster, in their attempt to move the audience and change the status of the black slave woman, slave narrators included in their narratives many passages in which they retell the exploitation and the abuse imposed upon black women, either as workers, mothers, or females. As women were seen as fragile beings by the middle-class audience of the nineteenth century, it was difficult for that audience to understand how a woman could do a man's work in the fields. And, moreover, how could they survive in spite of the beatings, the sexual abuse, the physical and psychological tortures, and the mutilations they underwent? It is ironical, but as the slave narrators worked to show the exploitation and abuses suffered by black women in order to arouse feelings of compassion in their audiences, they also helped to create a negative attitude toward the black woman as woman and mother.

Because the depiction of black women in slave narratives shows strong women who managed to survive despite the sufferings and the sexual exploitation, a great prejudice against them was established. If a woman was not "pure", she was not worthy. Since black women could not maintain their chastity

because the slave system forced them to act as sexual properties, Harriet Jacobs in **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**, advocates that black women should not be judged by the same standards as other women (Jacobs, 1987, p.386). Because the majority of the masters had slave mistresses, the black woman ended being considered sexually attractive and a menace to the white woman. Jacob's narrative reveals the jealousy of her mistress, and how she was humiliated even while she avoided the impertinent base offers of her master. In her autobiography she reveals the status accorded to the black slave girls:

She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to trouble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her , it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I know that some are too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most acutely, and shrink from the memory of it. (Jacobs, 1987, pp.361-362)

In the literature of the nineteenth century the black woman was often depicted as exotic, full of fire and sensuality in contrast to the white bourgeois woman, who was portrayed as delicate, pure, and fragile. Simultaneously, while society imposed upon black slaves moral notions of womanhood and motherhood such as purity, femininity, protection, maternal devotion and care, it denied the black women the right to develop familial relationships, specially in relation to

love and care by separating husband from wife and mother from child. Biographical accounts of black family dismemberment are depicted in horrifying details in slave narratives, and many times the black woman was accused of not being a proper wife and a good mother for her own children, of being unable to fulfill the standards of womanhood and motherhood.

As Frances S. Foster argues, standards for motherhood were very rigid during the nineteenth century (Foster, 1978, p.850). According to these standards women should be sensitive and sentimental, truly subservient and faithful to their husbands whatever the circumstances, and more important, they must protect their children, making all the efforts to maintain the family united. Under such ideology, mothers should die rather than live without their children. Taking into account such criteria, a woman who could endure life being sexually exploited by her masters and seeing her husband and children been sold or ill-treated did not deserve the status of wife and mother. Therefore, from the point of view of the dominant white society of the nineteenth century, black women failed in the obedience to their husbands and in the nurturing and care of their own children.

However, the black woman's failure to adhere to the idealized image of motherhood of the nineteenth-century American society was the consequence of slavery and not a question of ineptitude. Frederick Douglass' experience during childhood shows how slavery affected the development of the mother-child

relationship. In his narrative, Douglass declares that he hardly saw his mother, and that almost no communication was established between them:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. (Gates, 1987, p.256).

Douglass does not recollect if he ever saw his mother in daylight time: "she was with me in the night. She would lie down with me and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone." Therefore, "very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and sufferings". Douglass was around seven years old when his mother died and "never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, [he] received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions [he] should have probably felt at the death of a stranger." (Douglass, 1987, p.256). The fact that she walked a long distance on foot after a day of work shows her care, and her attempt, in spite of her condition, to develop an emotional link with her son. That they could not be together and she was a stranger to the little boy only attests the cruelty of the institution of slavery.

Being set apart from their children, husbands, mothers, fathers, and any relatives they could have, the black women, as black people in general, had to develop mechanisms of self-protection. Otherwise, they would become mad. As Houston Baker points out, “in a world where men are property and women victims of the owner’s lust, separation and a blunting or eradication of affection are normal”. (Baker, 1985, p.40). The slaves’ familial relationship, or better, the lack of it, was, therefore, the consequence of a system that employed contrastive and clashing notions of love and affection. For, if there were social, moral and affectionate attitudes that guided the relationship between white men and white women, these attitudes were not allowed to be shared by black people.

Black women were more than once abused in the name of the slave system, and this had a negative effect in the family structure of slaves. Adding to the fact that black women were not allowed to keep their children and take care of them, was the question of sexual abuse. In fact, sexual violence against female slaves was common among masters. Amidst the consequences of such treatment was the disruption of familial relationships. Slave narratives are full of examples in which wife, husband, and children are separated from each other. Many times the slave owners employed lashes and blackmails, using a black mother’s love for her children, as means to obtain licentious pleasures, as is mentioned in the narrative of Henry Bibb. Bibb and his family were put in prison while they were waiting to be sold. Meanwhile, his wife and child were taken out of the cell and carried to

another place. Bibb did not know the purpose and neither the place where they could be and thought that they were sold. Then one morning Bibb, surprised, met his wife Malinda again in prison. There, he tells us:

I had a short interview with my much abused wife, who told me the secret. She said that Garrison had taken her to a private house where he kept female slaves for the basest purpose. It was a resort for slave trading profligates and soul drivers, who were interested in the same business. Soon after she arrived at this place, Garrison gave her to understand what he brought her there for, and made a most disgraceful assault on her virtue, which she promptly repelled; and for which Garrison punished her with the lash, threatening her that if she did not submit that he would sell her child. The next day he made the same attempt, which she resisted, declaring that she would not submit to it; and again he tied her up and flogged her until her garments were stained with blood. (Apud Foster, 1978, p. 847)

As Bibb's wife did not submit to her master's will even being flogged, Garrison changed his tactic and sent the child to another part of the city, saying to her that "he meant to sell it and that she should never see it again". Bibb and Malinda were again separated and years later Bibb found out that she "was living in a state of adultery with her master" (Apud Foster, 1978, p.847).

For the slave owner it was a commodity to have sexual intercourse with black women and get them pregnant, for this was a means to enlarge their labor force without spending much money and to get profits selling slaves. The slave

narrator in **Narrative of Henry Box Brown** gives a clear account of such practices and their consequences in the life of a slave:

It is my candid opinion that one of the strongest motives which operate upon the slaveholders, and induce them to retain their iron grasp upon the unfortunate slave, is because it gives them unlimited control in this respect over the female slave. The great part of slaveholders are licentious men, and the most respectable and kindest of masters, keep some of their slaves as mistresses. It is for their pecuniary interest to do so in several respects. Their progeny is so many dollars and cents in their pockets, instead of being a bill of expense to them, as would be the case if their slaves were free; and mulatto slaves command a higher price than dark colored ones; but it is too horrid a subject to describe. Suffice is to say, that no slave has the least certainty of being able to retain his wife or husband a single hour; so that the slave is placed under strong inducements not to form a union of love, for he knows not how soon the chord wound around his heart would be snapped asunder, by the hand of the brutal slave-dealer. (Apud Foster, 1978, p.848)

Within the slave system, black human beings were seen as objects that would increase the profits of the white man. The term “objects’ here is pertinent because this was the way black people, and black women in special, were viewed by white masters: objects that could be used and exchanged by the dominant part of society according to their needs and wishes. In the case of the black female slave narratives, and as a counterpart of the male narratives, the female narrators moved within a circumscribed space, within a neighborhood or a territory, with little adventure and almost no physical movement. Here we find, for example,

Harriet Brent Jacob's **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**. Jacob's narrative, or Linda Brent's, which is her real name, tells about her humiliations and seven years of confinement in her grandmother's garret in order to avoid her master's sexual exploitation. Although at the end she manages to escape and move to another city, it took a long time for this to happen. During seven years she remained in the same place, within a confined space, making plans for the escape of her children and herself.

Nevertheless, as Houston Baker points out in his study about discursive formations in African-American Literature, although Brent's text to a major extent developed in "an essentially domestic arena in which the female slave will confront her destiny" she had to face "sudden transitions and violent disruptions"(Baker, 1985, p.50-51). The disrupting and transitory relationships between a slave mother and her children, all considered "transportable property", are well recorded in Brent's narration about the sorrows of New Year's day, when the slaves were sold to new masters:

...to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her old cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies. (Jacobs, 1987, p.350)

The link between mother and child is broken by what Baker terms “commercial deportation”, a term that he sees as vital to the understanding of the “economics of slavery” and of the origins of Afro-American discourse. The term “economics of slavery” stands “as a governing statement in the Afro-American discourse”, explains Baker, and signifies “the social system of the Old South that determined what, how and for whom goods were produced to satisfy human wants.” Moreover, the economy of the South was based on an “exploitative mode of production embodied in the plantation system and spirited by a myth of aristocratic patriarchalism” (Baker, 1985, p.26-27). In terms of economic production, the labor produced by slaves was exploited as a means to obtain and increase the master’s profit. Economic patriarchalism signified, according to Baker, “the master as the owner of all stock in his ‘children-as-slaves.’” (Baker, 1985, p.27) Taking into account the economics of slavery, female slave narratives such as Harriet Jacob’s seem to emphasize that the value of a female slave is not placed on the works of her hands, as it is for the male slave. Instead, as Baker explains, the narrative calls attention to the fact that pregnancy in black women was seen as profitable business to white masters. In such context, “women are considered of no value unless they continually increase their owner’s stock. They are put on a par with animals”(Baker, 1985, p.51). The mulatto children that were born as a result of white men’s violation of black women were, for their masters,

an increase in stock and also a sign of domination over women's capability for reproduction.

Linda Brent was able to change her status as a black woman and managed to get her children and herself free. In fact, Linda's children were born from a white man, but she, in a manner which proves her determination, had had an affectionate involvement with a man of her own choice, and not with her own master. This proves that she did not allow her master to use her body as a way to increase his commercial stock. Moreover, she managed to avoid domination over her body and spirit. Nevertheless, cases such as this were extremely rare during slavery and, as slave narrators used the victimization of black women to show the extremes to which the white men's hunger for domination could go, the image of the black female became frequently associated with illicit sexual intercourse, physical mutilation and incapacity for mothering. Foster mentions how in some male slave narratives the authors explored "their audience's attitudes toward the proper treatment of women when they emphasized the lack of special consideration even for nursing mothers and pregnant women." To document her point she quoted a passage from the **Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy**, which is transcribed here:

On the state I am speaking of, those women who had sucking children suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk, the infants being left at home; they

therefore could not keep up with the other hands. I have seen the overseer beat them with raw hide, so that blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts. A woman who gives offence in the field, and is large in the family way, is compelled to lie down over a hole made to receive her corpulency, and is flogged with the whip, or beat with a paddle, which has holes in it; at every hole comes a blister. One of my sisters was so severely punished in this way, that labor was brought on, and the child was born in the field. (Foster, 1978, p.851)

Perhaps male authors were not aware of the effect their depiction could have upon the social attitudes toward “black women as women”, argues Foster. However, she notices that female narrators knew “very well the status accorded women who deviated from the norm”. Although these women did not question the role definitions for women, they tried to excuse their actions. Jacob’s narrative, for example, emphasized how she fought against the base proposals of her master and said that the slave women should not be judged by the same standards of other women because theirs is a peculiar situation.

The consequences of the depiction of black women in slave narratives ended up being negative, argues Foster. Although the slave authors’ discussion of the “particular abuses of slave women contributed greatly to their cause since it appealed to the American protective attitudes toward women at a basic level”, it also portrayed slave women as “ravished females and inept mothers”. (Foster, 1978, p. 852). What the male slave narratives seem to portray and really want to accomplish is to show that slavery and the white people who connived with that

institution degraded the virtue of black women and did not allow them to fulfill the most basic needs of human beings, those of being able to love and be loved, to nurture and be nurtured, to develop emotional and affectionate ties, and to have familial relationships.

Since the white, middle-class concepts of femininity in the nineteenth century did not allow inclusion of beings able to survive the disintegration of familial ties, sexual degradation, and physical pain, black women were posed outside the boundaries of female sensibility: “as victim, the black woman became suspect since her submission to repeated violations was not in accord with prevailing notions of that femininity which caused women to die rather than to suffer abuse”. (Foster, 1978, p.853)

Before the Civil War the American society began to spread what was termed as “The Cult of True Womanhood”, which was focused on the stereotype of the perfect, loving “Angel of the Earth”– The Mother. This status given to motherhood was “in all of its particulars, fraudulent–cruelly hypocritical toward the white women and barbarous towards blacks.” (Wolff, 1993, p.107).

Wolff claims that this stereotype was harmful both to white and black women because, throughout the nineteenth century, mothers had no legal rights, what is to say no real power, on the decisions that concerned their children. Married white women “had no legal claim” to the children they bore. The father was the chief guardian, the withholder of power. Therefore, in spite of the

national reverence to motherhood (in this case, an idealized image of the mother), “actual mothers had no *real* power to protect the babies they had borne” and the moral responsibility that was given to them had to be combined with “*de facto* impotence”. (Wolff, 1993, p.107).

The situation was much worse for the black slave women. If they were married, neither they nor their husbands could keep the children because none had legal claims to them. Even if the black women happened to be married to white men, their children could not be free because it was legally stated that a child born of a black slave should follow the status of the mother and, as so, belonged to her master. There was no law protection for slaves and the masters could use them at their will, even if it was the most perverse. The apology for “The Angel of the Earth” could not be applied to African American women, advocated the enslavers, because “their nature was more primitive and less refined than that of white women; they were not ‘civilized’ – not really ‘attached’ to their children.” (Wolff, 1993, p.107).

In literature, “The Cult of True Womanhood” was spread in accordance with the sentimental novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Broadly, the sentimental novel exploited tenderness, compassion or sympathy to a disproportionate degree by presenting an idealized view of its subject. **Pamela**, a novel by the English writer Samuel Richardson, is a good example of this kind of literature. Published in 1740, this novel tells the story of a servant who avoided

the seduction of her mistress' son and was rewarded by marriage. She was portrayed as a tender and loving woman, completely attached to her moral beliefs, in such a way that the clergymen thought she was the perfect model of a woman, thus the novel came to be recommended for the education of the women's heart. Later on this image was carried to the representation of motherhood, thus creating the image of the idealized madonna, which guided the American literary imagination and its habits of mind in the mid-nineteenth century.

The images of femininity presented throughout the nineteenth century were more a matter of a dominant discourse than a presumable "reality". If we take **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl** into consideration we realize that the women's chastity and virtue advocated by the white man's discourse clashed with the reality imposed to the slave woman, who was obliged to submit. For the slave woman, the relationship with the white man, most of the time, meant rape. As Baker argues, "submission to the master's will becomes the only act of value the slave woman can perform in a violent patriarch" (Baker, 1985, p.53). Those who avoided submission had to pay a high price, others tried to negotiate with the economics of slavery, such as Linda Brent. The negotiation, nevertheless obliged her to spend part of her life in confinement.

Chapter IV

UNSPEAKABLE THOUGHTS (UN)SPOKEN, OR THE SILENCED

VOICE RECOVERED

Vozes-Mulheres

A voz de minha bisavó ecoou
criança
nos porões do navio
Ecoou lamentos
de uma infância perdida.

A voz de minha avó
ecoou obediência
aos brancos-donos de tudo.

A voz de minha mãe
ecoou baixinho revolta
no fundo das cozinhas alheias
debaixo das trouxas
roupagens sujas dos brancos
pelo caminho empoeirado
rumo à favela.

A minha voz ainda
ecoa versos perplexos
com rimas de sangue
e
fome

A voz de minha filha
recolhe todas as nossas vozes
recolhe em si
as vozes mudas caladas
engasgadas nas gargantas.

A voz de minha filha
recolhe em si
a fala e o ato.
ontem – o hoje – o agora.
Na voz de minha filha
se fará ouvir a ressonância
eco da vida-liberdade.

Conceição Evaristo

4.1 Rescuing the dead girl

Toni Morrison once said that one of her projects was to bring to life the black dead girl that was neglected by society for so many years, “rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention... bringing her back into living life”(Davies, 1994, p.136). Morrison proposes a diving not only into the myths established by patriarchal societies, but also into the historical and literary constructions developed by such societies throughout the centuries. In her writing the author discusses issues related to the history of black mothers, daughters, families, friendship and the tensions lived between the black community and the individual. In **Beloved** the question of motherhood is a central issue. Basing the novel on a historical account, the case of Margareth Garner, Morrison offers an alternative text of motherhood in slavery which posits the reconstruction of the Garner’s case against the figure of the “mammy”, the all encompassing figure of the female black slave which is found in many narratives.

Margareth Garner’s story attracted the attention of the media when it occurred in Cincinnati in 1856. Margareth Garner escaped from Kentucky and from her master, Mr. Archibald K. Gaines, crossed the Ohio River and got to Cincinnati, where she met her husband, Robert Garner, and their four children. However, she was pursued by her owner and the slave catchers. When these men arrived at the place in which the Garner family was hidden, they invaded the

house and one of the officers was wounded with a shot fired by Margareth Garner's husband. At this moment, as Levi Coffin points out,

Margareth Garner, seeing that her hopes of freedom were vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and, with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best. She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work (Apud Rushdy, 1992, p.569).

By constructing the plot of **Beloved** as a literary analogue of Garner's historical case, Morrison is able to present an unconventional side of black female slavery, a narrative that is an alternative reading of black motherhood in the "peculiar institution". The unconventionality of motherhood, in this case, means that the text of **Beloved** departs from the white literary creations regarding black women in that it portrays women who do not fit established types. As Carol Boyce Davies argues, at the same time that the novel makes the reader aware of a true historical fact that was not discussed in classical slaves' narratives (that some slave mothers did kill their children so that they would not have to face the horrors imposed by slavery), it confronts the white Euro-American creation of the black mammy (Davies, 1994, p.136).

4.2 Black mammies X ravished mothers

Linden Peach defines the stereotype of the black mammy as the mythical and “legendary figure of sentimental novels and popular films; obedient, obliging cheerful, resilient and resourceful”(Peach, 1995, p.14). The figure of the black mammy is well portrayed in Margaret Mitchell’s novel **Gone with the Wind**. For those who watched the film version of the novel it is almost impossible to forget the black rounded face of Mammy and her sometimes harsh, sometimes cheerful way of speaking to Scarlet and to some other members of the O’Hara’s family. In her overweight figure and in her behavior one can find what was considered, according to the white imagination, the ideal portrait of the black female: a loyal servant that is tolerant and willing to protect her mistress and the children of her master whatever the situation may be. In Mitchell’s narrative, Mammy does her best to take care of Scarlet. She even accepts Scarlet’s blackmails if she thinks this would be of any good to the girl. Mammy, in fact, assumes the role of the mother in terms of providing food, body care and advice. Additionally, she does not abandon the O’Hara’s family in the aftermath of the Civil War. Instead, she stays at Tara and welcomes Scarlet when she returns home, helping her to restore the house and the land that belong to the family. Despite the devastation and the hard times of war, Mammy stands as solid as a rock, a resisting force that gives Scarlet part of the strength she needs to rebuild Tara. Mitchell’s book portrays life in slavery through romantic lenses. Mitchell’s patriarchal point of view tries

to justify the slave system, and thus, it is a damaging representation. As Peach argues, the stereotype of the black mammy “legitimizes motherhood as the female function most commonly associated with black women” and as such it gives an illustration of how Euro-American linguistic representation influenced the way white and black people perceived black women.

Another example of the figure of the black mammy is the character Dilsey in William Faulkner’s novel **The Sound and the Fury**. Although physically and spiritually less stereotyped than Mitchell’s Mammy, Dilsey, the black female who serves the decadent Compson family, is a character who peaceably endures weakness and tribulation. Dilsey has worked for the Compsons for several generations, and in spite of being a witness of their downfall, she continued to serve them with loyalty and devotion. Her character is posited as a fixed center of the household in contrast to the disintegration of the family. She assumes Mrs. Compson’s mothering place, providing for the physical and spiritual needs of the Compsons. Contrasting to the Compsons’ arrogance, Dilsey is all charity and good sense. She cares for everyone in the house and functions as a kind of mediator between the members of the family. In a shattered world, Dilsey, like Mitchell’s Mammy, stands as a unifying and sustaining force, a force that encompasses mother love, care and devotion to the white master’s family.

Paradoxically, this portrait of the black woman as the supporter of the house-hold clashes against the black woman’s condition as a slave. The Euro-

American literary portrait of the black female servant does not match with the “reality” of the slave woman. How could she be loyal, tender, and maternal under the pressure and the punishments of the slave system? In the novel **Beloved**, Baby Suggs, a motherly character, states this point clearly when she makes a comment about her children being played around like checkers, as pieces that are moved in a game of dominance and power.

4.3 Interweaving relationships: circularity, multiplicity, blanks, and magic

As recent interpretation theories show, there is not one single way of interpreting a fact, but a full range of possibilities, or slices of “reality” which we are not able to apprehend in its totality. Morrison tries to show the complexity of interpreting the history of womanhood and motherhood in black female terms, thus offering an alternative text to the historical and literary writings about black women. The multiplicity of possible readings of **Beloved** is significant specially if one takes into consideration the different points of view of the characters in the novel. Following the development of the narrative, the reader is able to see that the text turns round and round one single fact: the murder of Beloved, one of Sethe’s daughter, that was killed by her mother when she was two years old. As an attempt to recover the oral and communal quality of black people’s stories, and as a formal resource learned from Faulkner’s narrative technique, the same event is told and retold by different characters: by Sethe herself, Denver,

Beloved, Paul D and people from the black community. Each time we hear the same story retold, something that enlarges our comprehension of the reasons for Sethe's child's murder is added. The readers are also led to participate in the reconstruction of the murder while little by little they are allowed to examine the same event from different perspectives. For Morrison, "the point was to tell the same story again and again. I can change it if I contribute to it when I tell it. I can emphasize special things. People who are listening comment on it and make it up, too, as it goes along"(Mc Kay, 1993, p.403). Morrison wants to have the maximum participation of the readers: "I want a very strong visceral and emotional response as well as a very clear intellectual response". She does not want to give her readers only "something to swallow" but "something to feel and think about" (Morrison Apud Mc Kay, 1993, p.403-404).

Morrison's aim in telling a story with holes and spaces to be filled in achieves a dual purpose. First, the blanks in the narrative are, in a way, a materialization of the history of the black people. Traditional History, built upon the ideologies of the White Euro-American man, excluded the voices of the Blacks and of the poor people. So, under the surface of History we see another history: the silence of bodies and voices violated by the discourse of the dominators. Second, by having us readers as co-participants in the development of the narrative Morrison establishes a deeper connection between us and the

narrative thread, which strengthens our desire to get meaning from the text providing, thus, the possibility of new and different interpretations.

The novel starts with a heavy atmosphere, delineating the path for what is to come. An omniscient narrator tells that “124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby’s venom”. The missing number 3 in the house’s number, which may be referring to the loss of the third child in the family, and the adjective “spiteful” set the tone of the narrative: a horrific tale of loss and absence. In discussing why she started the novel with numbers and not with words Morrison explained that numbers are not heavy with signification as words are. Besides, she wanted the house to have “an identity separate from the street or even the city”, an identity emphasized by the adjective “spiteful”, which is new since usually modifiers are added to words and not to numbers. In *Beloved*, numbers “constitute an address, a thrilling enough prospect for slaves who had owned nothing, least of all an address” (Morrison, 1990, p.228). The house is depicted not only as a place to live in, but also as a living character that reflects and influences the attitudes and feelings of the people who live in it. It is there, in that closed space apart from communal life that we learn about Sethe’s story and also about other black women’s stories.

Since the beginning of the novel we see Morrison’s commitment to the construction of a black identity characteristic of its own, and therefore, different from that given by the white dominant society. To create this new identity in the

novel **Beloved**, Morrison goes back to the slave narratives, the first written experience of black people, and subverts the literary and moral conventions of that genre, providing a new perspective on black female history. Since the conventions of the classical slave narratives did not allow the inclusion of subjects such as sexuality, sexual abuse and abortion, the readers have to fill in the absences in these narratives. Morrison, both as a reader and an African-American author whose work deals with the context of an erased history, demands the readers' cooperation in that the reader is invited to fill in these blanks in a dialogical relation with the author, the narrator(s) and the characters. The dialogical relation mentioned here is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's view of language as a dialogue and refers to the simultaneity of meanings that exists in any act of communication, be it in life or in literature.

While it is not my aim to use Bakhtin's dialogical thought as the base ground for my analysis of **Beloved**, I think that some of his concepts may highlight some key issues in Morrison's work. I am interested in the meanings the terms dialogism and heteroglossia have in the Bakhtinian thought and, later on in this thesis, I shall use these concepts again to highlight some of Morrison's narrative techniques. When I mention that a dialogical relation is established between the readers and Morrison's novels, I am aware that this kind of relation is characteristic of any kind of reading. However, I think that this dialogical

relation is expanded and achieves a deeper signification in Morrison's novels as she provides openings for the readers to come into the narrative.

Dialogism in language, according to Bakhtin, is possible only in a world dominated by heteroglossia. The term heteroglossia refers to a situation in which a variety of languages, cultures, classes and ideologies are put together and one which was used by Bakhtin to denominate the diversity of discourse in the social context and in the novel. As Michael Holquist states in his study of Bakhtin, in dialogism "all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying *simultaneous but different* space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies)." (Holquist, 1990, p.20-21). For Bakhtin, meaning is related to the position of the observer, and this observer "is also, simultaneously, an *active participant* in the relation of simultaneity." (Holquist, 1990, p.21). Bakhtin's dialogism is directed by the "law of placement" (borrowed from Kant's categories of space and time and Einstein's theory of relativity). According to this law, we cannot forget that the meaning we get from whatever we observe is shaped by the place and time from which we and others perceive it. Thus, Bakhtin's dialogism is centered on the premise that, to really get meaning, it is necessary to have a situation in which one observer looks at another observer. In such a situation,

You can see things behind my back that I cannot see, and I can see things behind your back that are denied to your vision. We are both doing essentially the same thing, but from different places: although we are in the same event, the event is different for each of us. Our places are different not only because our bodies occupy different positions in exterior, physical space, but also because we regard the world and each other from different centers in cognitive time/space. (Holquist, 1990, p.21)

The dialogical relation to otherness expressed in the Bakhtinian thought can be explored in Morrison's novel, specially in **Beloved**. First, if we take the observing position of African-Americans, the context of the novel (the implications of slavery in the lives of black males, females, and children) is drawn from the otherness that is set in relation to the white dominant ideology. Throughout **Beloved**, this ideology regards black people as sub-human, as objects to be exchanged and whose status should be paired with animals. However, perhaps it is the dialogical relation to this horrible otherness which impels Morrison to create characters in search of their own identities as Blacks, pursuing definitions for both their personal and communal selves. Second, to write **Beloved**, Morrison observed two other observers of slavery: the slave narratives and History itself. It was her capacity to see behind the backs of the traditional slave narratives and the History written by Western ideologies what helped her to unveil the obscured, the unspoken, the silenced events of these narratives. Finally,

by asking the participation of the reader in the development of the stories the characters tell, and by making the reader draw implications for things the same characters are not able to tell, or for things the author herself left open, that is, by demanding the readers to see what is behind the characters' and the author's back, Morrison was able to show artistically the dialogical multiplicity of human perceptions both in life and in art.

Morrison's act of filling in the blanks in the history of a people who have no written tradition depends largely on memory and imagination. She probably would not have been able to achieve the desired effect if she had used the Realist conventions of story-telling. The author, therefore, had to draw on other kinds of literary supplementation. Despite Morrison's rejection of the definition of her work as magic realist, and her struggle to be recognized as an author writing from within a black folk literary tradition, I suggest to approach **Beloved** having in mind the possibility of Morrison's use of Magic Realism as a supplementation to the development of the narrative. However, I would like to stress that I choose this line of interpretation not only because of her being, perhaps unconsciously, influenced by it, but also because Magic Realism and the African-American oral tradition share some similarities in their inclusion of magic and the marvelous as a means of increasing signification. Also, it seems to me that, since Morrison writes from an African-American tradition which encompasses "hybrid cultural experiences" that often make African-American writers "draw from both African

and European heritages”, (Peach, 1995, p.12), the magic realist mode can highlight some of the features of **Beloved**.

Additionally, we should keep in mind that the term “Magic Realism” is used to refer to a body of Latin American literature that does not follow the Euro-American mainstream tradition and that, as suggested by Peach, the term is now being “applied to writers from outside Latin America, including, for example, those from the Caribbean, Nigeria and India” (Peach, 1995, p.12). Indeed, as Linden Peach points out, the label “Magic Realism” is seen by Stephen Slemon as appropriate to refer to works that originate in the margins, and “can itself signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems” (Apud Peach, 1995, p.13). The suggestion that Magic Realism is a kind of rejection of mainstream Euro-American literary conventions and techniques, and the fact that we intend to approach **Beloved** in the light of such a model does not mean that we see Morrison’s novel only as a reaction against the mainstream tradition. In fact, Morrison herself emphasized that she writes about Black people in the way she does to establish an identity, to give shape to a body of literature that was neglected by the Western literary cannon. She does not write against this cannon.

Another point worth pursuing for the justification of reading **Beloved** as a novel with characteristics of magic realism is that Morrison writes about people which had their language fragmented and silenced by the white man’s power of naming. To talk about a people who had no language, no voice they could call

their own in the American continent, and to restore such a voice, the author had to resort to the power of imagination and fantasy. The stolen language becomes itself a ghost that, to become alive, depends on the power of the writer's imaginative recreation. Realism would not suffice for the act of recreating the lost voice. Something more is needed, something that could fill in the spaces left by realistic conventions, and that could be the use of the folk oral tradition allied to characteristics of magic realism. This kind of supplementation seems to suit Morrison's work since she wants to reveal not only the voice of the black male, but specially that of his counterpart, the black woman in African-American literature and life; that is, she wants to recover the voice that has been silenced for centuries of social repression and sexual exploitation, a voice that is revealed in the form of absences and a fragmented discourse because this is the way the narrative of **Beloved** was built with, by little pieces of information that are carefully rearranged like a quilt, a piece of art that embodies the work silently done by black female ancestors with scraps and pieces of clothing artistically arranged.

The history of the black slave women cannot be separated from their beliefs in magic and the supernatural since their lives and their memories were inhabited by haunting, ghostly images of children and husbands gone or dead, a history made of loss and absence: loss of children, husbands, family ties, and absence of rights. The losses and absences are showed throughout the narrative of

Beloved as, for example, in the running away of Sethe's two boys (the only male figures that inhabited the ghostly house), in the lack of color, in the missing number 3 in the house's number, in the death of Babby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, in Sethe's painful attempt to repress her memories and not tell her whole story to Denver, the remaining daughter, in Sethe's stolen milk, in the absence of the "sixty million and more" to whom the novel is dedicated and in the apparently loose pattern of the narrative. Such losses and absences were the consequences of the white man's power over the black body, as the narrator tells us referring to Baby Suggs:

. . . in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces include her children . . . (p.23)

The absences and losses are related to human beings that are viewed not as such but as commercial items. The narrator used words such as "rented out, loaned out, bought up", words that deny to the people involved the status of human beings. The black slaves, being considered commercial items that could be moved around in order to increase the profit of the masters, became absent father figures and men whose manhood was denied. From the point of view of the black

mother, the worst aspect of considering black people as objects is related not only to her body as profit, but also to the violent cut in the mother-child relationship for, as Baby states, the worst is the shock of knowing that whatever the mother does, it would not make a difference in the treatment of her children. Although Baby was able to keep her son Halle, the rest of her family was dismembered and sold and the only thing she could remember about her children while she was a slave was the fact that her first born liked the burned bottom of bread. Sethe's response "That's all you let yourself remember"(p.5) explains to which extent slavery affected the relationship of mother and child.

4.4 A maternal counternarrative to the white man's dominance

Sethe, on the other hand, offers a counternarrative to the text which says that black children belong to the white master. For her, being a mother was above white people's imposition on black women as mothers. Being a mother for Sethe was to be able to decide upon the fate of her own children, and this she does when she sends her children to Baby Suggs' house in Cincinnati and runs off pregnant and alone from the Sweet Home plantation after being raped by schoolteacher's nephews. She had to leave alone because her husband Halle had not appeared at the time they had set up for their escape. Later on she learns that Halle had seen the scene of her rape with the stealing of her milk. As a

consequence, Halle became mad and the last thing we are told about him is that he was seen spreading butter all over his face.

Sethe's position regarding motherhood is a point in Denver's deliverance. Facing all the pains and fears, Sethe is able to survive because she has a life inside her protuberant belly, and if it were not for this life and for the lives of her other children in Baby's house, she would have given up her life. Her concern for the life of her children's mother was what made her endure the pain and the terror she felt in her escape. Sethe's subjective center, therefore, was not her own, but her children's: "the best thing she was , was her children" (p.251). However, Sethe would rather see her children dead than let them live again under the sufferings, humiliations and degradation of slavery. And that is what happens when the slave catchers came to take her back to Sweet Home and she cut her baby daughter's neck with a handsaw.

Sethe's womanhood is denied when she has to undergo not only the humiliation of hearing schoolteacher's listing what he considers as her animalistic characteristics, but also the physical and psychological degradation of her body when she was beaten, raped, and treated like a cow, having the milk that belonged to her children sucked by schoolteacher's nephews. Nevertheless, despite the pain of having her back stripped by schoolteacher's whip and the humiliating experience of being the source of pleasure for the two white boys, and for schoolteacher's reassurance of power and dominance, what is more

difficult for her to overcome is to have the milk who belonged to her children stolen. In her childhood, Sethe never had enough milk from her mother because the woman was absent, most of the times, working in the fields, and the milk her mother had was to feed the white master's children first. The hunger Sethe felt for her mother's milk, symbolizing also the hunger for care, love, and nurturing is reflected inversely in her relationship with her dead daughter *Beloved* later in the narrative. Although Sethe sucked from other black women, she felt the emotional lack of a nurturing relationship with her mother. Slavery had robbed Sethe, *Beloved* and many unaccounted black women of one of the most poignant aspects in the relationship between human beings: the mother-child relationship. And, ironically, it was the attempt to avoid that her children feel the hunger, lack of nurture and of care she herself had felt that made Sethe decide to subvert the power of the slave master by killing her "own best thing".

Sethe also subverts the notion of immobility due to pregnancy developed through traditional narratives that are connected to slavery. Carol Boyce Davies, in discussing the question of mobility and travel in *Beloved* argues that Morrison confronts narratives in which motherhood and child bearing are instances that inhibit mobility. (Davies, 1994, p.140). Because they are women and mothers they cannot travel as men do. In fact, in many narratives, women are confined to closed spaces, for example, to the house of the master, or, more specifically, to the kitchen, or, in the case of Harriet Jacob's narrative, to the garret of her

grandmother's house. It is very significant that in **Beloved** Sethe, though pregnant, is able to run away, for the novel offers an alternative vision of pregnancy and motherhood under slavery. More meaningful is the fact that Sethe gives birth to Denver, the youngest of her children, in the middle of her journey from slavery to freedom with the help of a white woman called Amy Denver. Significantly, Denver, who is named after this white woman, is the one who, near the end of the novel, steps towards the community and breaks the circle in which Sethe encapsulates herself. Despite the barrier that separates the black and the white woman, Sethe and Amy were able to blur it and to work on Denver's delivery "appropriately and well".

The significance of Denver's birth lies on the fact that she was born outside the circle that encompassed slavery, and this offers other possibilities in terms of female development and maturity. Morrison highlights this significance by presenting Denver's birth as the "mythic birth of a hero" (Hirsch, 1994, p.101).

4.5 Giving body to scraps

Although the circumstances of Denver's birth are mentioned in several instances during the narrative, the most impressive and enchanting account of it is given when Denver, in the company of her older sister Beloved, assumes Sethe's

and Baby Suggs' role of story tellers and, as an African-American griot¹, Denver reconstructs the passage in details based on the stories that had been told to her since her childhood. At this moment, Denver symbolically becomes the mother who feeds her child with magical stories, and by giving to Beloved "the most precious things she owns, the story of her own origin" she is able to enrich the story and to keep the union with her sister (Hirsch, 1994, p.101). Denver, assuming the function of a griot/writer, gives life to the narrative: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. . . ." Denver's narration "was smelling like grass and feeling like hands. . . ." (p.78). This passage emphasizes the use of sensations and feelings with the senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch as alive as if the event were happening at that moment, with a simultaneity that disrupts chronology, which intensifies the act of creation, thus equating the griot/author to the Creator. However, to fulfill the act of creation it is necessary to have the other, in this case Beloved, who assumes the role of listener/reader: "Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how

¹ Griot is the African name given to story-tellers.

it really was, . . .”(p.78). In this scene Morrison focuses on the relationship between fancy and magic and the beginning of an individual’s history, the act of creating a narrative unveiling the act of inscribing history.

Denver’s birth is narrated as a story full of enchantment, outside time and space, a mythic tale in which two women meet and succeed in giving birth despite odd conditions:

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn’t care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well. A patroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws - a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair - wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no patroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well. (p.85)

As Hirsch suggests, Denver’s birth is narrated in a mythic dimension: it occurs outside of time (in between late afternoon and nightfall, with four stars visible on the sky), outside the social context, in a transitory space between slavery and freedom, on the edge of a river, showing “the power of maternal creation against immeasurable odds” (Hirsch, 1994, p.101). The mythic birth becomes even more impressive when the two women, Sethe and Amy, “clambered ashore to see what, indeed, God had in mind”. The landscape they see is a mirroring image of the delivery they performed just minutes before and :

“Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the river bank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river’s edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects - but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. . .” (p.84). Denver, like the spores of bluefern, represents the hope of a future, the promise of a new life for a generation of women in the path to freedom and to a new identity in spite of the fact that she may be considered a fragile being, like an insect. This is “a story of maternal creation and survival that, unlike the rest of the novel, is ‘a story to pass on’, a story that does get passed on, that is hopeful and forward looking” (Hirsch, 1994, p.101). Moreover, in turning this passage into a heroic account, Morrison “allows the daughters to find themselves in the mother’s story so that Denver might develop into the mature, self-reliant, caring, and community-oriented woman she becomes at the end of the novel” (Hirsch, 1994, p.101).

Also impressive is Sethe’s running away in spite of the bad conditions of her feet and back, not to mention her breasts, the part that hurts her more not just because of her pregnancy, but because what it contained was stolen, and the theft was related to the best part of her. The feet are for the slaves what the wings are for birds, the ultimate agents of flight, as Davies puts it. Sethe, having the agents of mobility swollen and bleeding, manages to escape even in such bad conditions. As Hirsch mentions, behind the story of Denver’s birth there is another story, one

that inflects and informs that of Denver's birth and is inscribed on Sethe's body "- the story of slavery and escape, which qualifies and transforms the story of individual and cultural birth and rebirth". Therefore, "the blood is not only the blood of birth but the blood on Sethe's back where she was beaten, the blood on her feet on which she had to run. The milk is not just the milk she developed for this new baby but the milk she was carrying for the baby girl she had to send ahead, the milk taken by the masters at Sweet Home provoking her escape" (Hirsch, 1994, p.102).

4.6 Bodies as landscapes for inscriptions

In *Beloved* the female body is not only a "vehicle for the child's birth and creation: it has a narrative of its own" (Hirsch, 1994, p.102). Sethe's body is itself a landscape in which narratives are inscribed. The front part of her body was marked by a maternal system of relations (belly, breasts, vagina) embodied in her gender. The back symbolically exposed the marks of a patriarchal order in its extreme.

Sethe's body was marked just like her mother's, who had a circle and a cross under her breasts. Sethe's mother was able to change the slave's inscription and to make it her own personal mark. However, despite this identification, Sethe was not able to recognize her mother's mark when she was killed, showing thus how damaging was the power of slavery on the relationship and identification of

mother and child. Sethe, to some extent, mirrors her mother's individuality when she refers to the scars on her back using Amy's metaphor for it: a chokecherry tree in blossom. Sethe embraces Amy's subversion, modifying the definition given by the Master and recreating her inscription as something beautiful, inviting, nurturing: "A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. You got a whole tree on it. In bloom. . ."(p.79). Despite the fact that this definition was not Sethe's own but the reading of a white woman, and taken into account the pain it caused her, Sethe welcomes it eagerly because it gives her a means of turning schoolteacher's mark of domination upside down. If Sethe was able to invert the physical mark imprinted on her body, she was not apt, however, to effect such transformation with the scars that were placed deep inside her. That is one of the reasons for her effort to keep the past at bay. The hidden inner scars left by slavery were much worst and Sethe needed someone or something else to look inside and help her bring these to the surface in order to rescue her love for life and for herself.

Beloved, differently from Sethe, has no physical marks of slavery such as those made by the whip or rape, or a mark that identifies her as property. She has, instead, an inscription left by her mother's desire to subvert the discourse of possession imposed by the master. She carries the mark of a handsaw under her

neck, the thing Denver sees when Beloved undresses to sleep. This mark, however, is the consequence of the sufferings and degradation black women had to submit to in order to stay alive, and it is there exactly because Sethe refuses her children to submit to it. In a way we can say that this mark works as an inverted image of the marks inflicted by slavery. Yes, she possesses an inscription, but one that marks her as not belonging to a white owner. In fact, it marks Sethe's refusal of all the implications related to being a slave woman. Sethe's "No. Nono. Nonono" establishes this difference. Sethe's negotiation with the economics of slavery is an absolute negation: no, she would not let her children be set apart from her; no, she would never give her milk to feed the white master's children risking the sustenance of her own progeny; no, she refuses to be defined by white man's concepts and standards; no, she would never permit her daughters to be dirtied by white man's hands.

4.7 Gathering scattered parts together

Contrary to Sethe, Baby Suggs is a female character who, to some extent, negotiated with slavery using a different strategy. She tried to avoid a violent confrontation with her masters, talking "as little as she could get away with" and developed a mechanism of prevention in relation to maternal love while she was a slave. After Sethe's arrival at 124, when Baby Suggs feels the presence of the white master approaching the house as a "dark and coming thing" we learn the

extent of the burden of motherhood in slavery and the sadness of not knowing her children's adult appearance or if they were dead or alive:

What was left to hurt her now? News of Halle's death? No. She had been prepared for that better than she had for his life. The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn the features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own—fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. (p.139).

It was only after she was freed and moved to 124 that she allowed herself to think about a reconnection with her familial bounds, realizing that, in fact, she knew more about her children than about herself, raising questions that she never dared to think about because, due to her status as a black woman, she was not allowed to see herself as a subject. Voicing concerns that probably marked black women's questioning about their own selves, Baby Suggs asks: "Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me?"(p.140). Baby Suggs, like millions of black women, could not answer these questions in slavery, and, in spite of Mr. Garner's "kindness" at Sweet Home, Baby Suggs suggests that slavery is slavery, no matter under what conditions. Or, as she sums up "It's

better here, but I'm not"(p.140). If speech was blocked during her life at Sweet Home and she "didn't know what she looked like", in freedom she started paying attention to herself, so, "she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling": "these hands belong to me. These my hands". Next she felt her heart beating and her whole body as really belonging to herself. After this, significantly, she chooses her name, different from that given in her sales ticket. Despite Mr. Garner's complaint that "Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro" Baby sticks to it, both as a means of connection with the man she considered her husband and also as the power of defining herself as a black man's wife and a mother, not a white master's slave anymore. Baby Suggs, as other characters in **Beloved**, embodies the silence of black women in slavery. Because she has already lived with all the base proposals of slavery before Sweet Home, she resorted to silence as a defense and a negotiation with what "the roots of her tongue" could not manage.

Baby Suggs is a motherly character that offers an alternative mother-daughter relationship to Sethe's and a communal motherhood to the black people of Cincinnati. She is described as an "unchurched preacher" who gathers people from the community in the clearing and teaches them to love themselves; to love and nurture the very parts of their bodies, including flesh and heart. "You got to love it, you", insists she. The maternal care Baby Suggs devoted to the black people in the clearing is extended in particular to Sethe when she arrived at 124

Bluestone Road after giving birth to Denver and crossing the Ohio River with the aid of a black man known as Stamp Paid. Baby Suggs ritualistically washed Sethe's body carefully in sections both to clean it and as an attempt to erase the marks left by the white masters, wrapped her body with torn sheets, soaked her feet in a bucket with salt water and juniper, washed her nipples and greased her back; finally, she provided a new dress for her daughter-in-law. After having her parts gathered together by the tenderness of Baby Suggs' hands, Sethe was able to reunite with her children and to feed them properly. Later on in the narrative, Sethe has to be bathed again and the pieces of her have to be rearranged, this time with the help of Paul D.

As suggested by Hirsch, Baby Suggs, the woman who was freed by her own son's extra work on Sundays, the mother who lost all of her children to slavery is the woman who provides Sethe with an alternative of maternal care she could have had from her own mother. The first and only meeting Sethe had with her mother was devoted to a conversation related to marks that identified Sethe's mother as so. Sethe, at that moment asked to be marked too in order to be recognized by her mother. As a reply she was slapped on the face. Like her mother, later Sethe is marked too, not only by the scars on her body, a physical sign of the cruelty of slavery, but by her mother's history of infanticide which later she reenacts. Baby Suggs, on the other hand, does her best in order to alleviate the marks inflicted by slavery on Sethe's body. Baby Suggs is a

priestess, a kind of matriarch who detains the power, strength, the mystery and the enchantment of the word as the creator of new possibilities for love and affectionate relationships in the community, a metaphysical guardian of the communal life that gathers the scattered, disjointed parts of black people and puts them together. If the Clearing is an open sanctuary in which she promotes the act of self and communal love, it is in her house that she develops a net of connections with other people. Her house was a meeting point in which people talked about the most recent news and run away slaves were helped in their path to freedom; a place for care, comfort and sustenance for friends and strangers “where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” and “the lamp burned all night long” (p.87) like a lighthouse in a stormy sea.

It was at that house that Baby Suggs decided that “because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart” (p.87). It was there, too, that Sethe had twenty-eight days in which she felt what it was to be free and to love her “best things”, a place and time in which Sethe learned “how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day”. “Days of healing, ease and real talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better”(p.95). There, at Baby’s house,

she learned to free herself. However, soon Sethe realized that “freeing herself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another”. (p.95).

When Sethe meets her children at Baby’s house the language expresses Sethe’s mixed feelings and sensations with a confusion of prepositions: “Sethe lay in bed under, around, over, among, but specially with them all” and “it didn’t matter whether it was real or not”. What mattered was that she was there and “she kept kissing them”(p.93) all over their little bodies. This scene mirrors Baby Suggs’s sermon in the Clearing, when she urges Black people to love themselves from flesh to heart:

“Here” she said “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they [the white men] do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* . . . And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beating and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.” (p.88)

Baby’s emphasis on Black people’s love for the heart is significant because, symbolically, the heart is the organ used to represent emotions, feelings and affection, and it is also connected to understanding (not to reason). By loving

their hearts Black people would be able to evaluate themselves by their own values, to develop a sense of love that was denied to them in slavery, to understand the reasons behind their actions and feelings, to strengthen their sense of community, and thus, to achieve healing.

4.8 Mirroring effects and visual images

The analysis of Morrison's characters may lead to the impression that her female protagonists are strong and perfect women. In an interview made when Morrison came to Brazil to release the novel **Tar Baby** at Bienal do Livro, **Revista Leia** told her that her main female characters were strong women and asked if they were not a little too perfect. Morrison's answer was that she tried to describe complex women, vulnerable in some areas and competent in others (**Leia**, 1990, p.34). The complexity of Morrison's characters reflects the complexity of human beings and, as suggested by Hirsch, the novel offers different possibilities for reading family structure. If for Freud the model family was based on a triangular relationship with the father at the apex (and such is the case of the Oedipal family structure), for Morrison, and specifically in **Beloved**, the mother, Sethe, is the center, but this center, to have an identity of its own, depends on the relationship with other elements of the circle such as Paul D, Denver, Beloved, Baby Suggs, and the entire community. The relationship between these characters is made up of reflecting or mirroring images. The

connection between Sethe, Beloved and Denver, for example is reflected in visual images related to water, milk and shadows. The first time Sethe sees Beloved she feels her bladder filled to capacity and remembers her mother and then Denver's birth. Before introducing the link that would be established between Beloved and Sethe, the narrator says that "Rainwater held on to pine needles for dear life and Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe" (p.57), thus showing how Beloved would be obsessively dependent on Sethe's love and how the relationship would be dangerous for both of them, so their "... two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords"(p.57) while Sethe prepared things in the kitchen and Beloved followed her. Later on, like images in inverted mirrors, Beloved assumes the role of mother and Sethe the role of child: "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child"(p.250).

Similarly, events that happened during slavery are reflected in its aftermath. The lack of nurturing and the hunger Sethe felt as a slave child is linked to the scene in which she has her milk stolen by schoolteacher's nephews and these two moments have a counterpart in Denver's care for Beloved. The part of the narrative in which Denver nurses Beloved "like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the lover"(p.78) contrasts with the slavery scene that associates nurturing and feeding to humiliation and degradation. Hunger and humiliation and the silence imposed on black people by slavery are also reflected through images related to oral activities such as Sethe's biting her tongue when she was beaten

with cowhide, Beloved's swallowed parts and her dismemberment that started with a tooth coming out of her mouth, Denver's taste for sweets and Beloved's absolute hunger for them, Paul D's bit in his mouth and the guards' semen he and other black men had to suck as breakfast in the chain-gang in Georgia.

Another time in which we are led to associate two images to the mirroring effect is in the scene in which Schoolteacher interrogates one of his slaves, Sixo, about an allegedly stolen shoat. Sixo, who valued himself according to his own principles, justifies that he killed and ate the shoat but that he did not steal it. Sixo's explanation relies on a logic that would not be understood by schoolteacher: that he needed food to stay alive and do good work, so his act should not be considered a stealing but a way to guarantee his master's profit. Although schoolteacher thought the argument was clever, he 'beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not to the defined.'(p.190). From this last sentence we can draw implications that can be related to the act of making history. If traditional History takes the definitions given by the definers as the ultimate truth, Morrison's novel inverts this and shows that a history that takes into account only one single view is a faulty history, one that is superficial and tendentious towards the minorities. From the point of view of the white man, Sixo's act would be a theft, from Sixo himself, a necessity or, as Sethe thinks, an obligation, since schoolteacher did not allow them to have enough food to survive.

Sixo's act is linked to Sethe's stealing food from Sawyer's Restaurant, the place in which she works. The motivation behind Sethe's act, however, is different from that of Sixo. If in his case the motivation was the necessity to satisfy a basic physical need, in her, the theft is related to her negation to feel humiliated at the store, waiting to buy food and having to see the white people attended first. Sethe's situation in the store probably reminds her of the time she had to wait for the white children's sucking first, when, possibly, nothing was left for her sustenance in her mother's breasts.

4.9 Searching for some velvet

Reading Morrison's novel is an act of unraveling layer after layer of understanding. As Horvitz puts it, "as a simultaneously accessible and yet extremely difficult book, **Beloved** operates with such complexity that as soon as one layer of understanding is reached, another equally richly textured, emerges to be unraveled" (Horvitz, 1989, p.157).

The relationship between Sethe and Amy, the girl who helps in Denver's birth, for example, shows that, in spite of the differences between the two women, they have things in common. Although Amy is white, and therefore, has better conditions to survive than Sethe, she, like Sethe, lives under the power of the white male. Amy Denver had run away looking for some velvet, for some softness she could not find in the place where she used to live. Despite the

difference in the reason for their flight, in the complexion of their skin, and in their social class (Amy is “white trash”, a person that belongs to the lower class, Sethe is a slave) they share a similar condition, that of being females and servants living in a world ruled by white males. Both, in a way, are excluded because of their class and gender. Amy had also experienced the lash, although not in the same degree as Sethe did, and the fact that she does not accept the possibility of her master’s being her actual father suggests an act of rape towards her mother, an act that is repeated with herself and which, in some ways, equates Amy’s condition to Sethe’s.

The fact of belonging to the same sex and of meeting in the woods, a place that belongs to no one in particular, allows the development of a friendly relationship that leads to complicity between the two characters. With Amy’s help, Sethe finds some comfort in spite of her swollen feet, which hurt when Amy massages them. “Anything coming back to life hurts” said Amy in answer to Sethe’s complaints, and this refers not only to Sethe’s pregnant body and swollen feet, or to Sethe’s memories of the past, which she tries to keep at bay as much as possible, but to a whole people’s confrontation with their own history. The complicity between the women is reinforced when Amy establishes a different connection in relation to the scars on Sethe’s back. For Amy, the marks inflicted by schoolteacher’s beating after the rape look like a chokecherry tree blossoming on her back. That part of the narrative may refer to the comradeship that can

develop between women despite differences of race and class, indicating a mutual understanding related to their condition as women because, as Sethe, Amy was also sexually abused. Amy was going to Boston in search of some velvet, and partially, it was because of Amy's words that Sethe was able to overcome the pain in her body. The mothering connection is symbolically stated in Amy's care for Sethe's pregnant body and in the song Amy sings in order to distract and alleviate Sethe's pain. A complex net of relationship is established through Amy's narrative since the words she sang were related to a song her own mother used to sing. Barriers of time and space were disintegrated through the enchanting song, linking the two women and the memories of their mothers.

Amy's recurrent emphasis on velvet may highlight her connection with Sethe. Her hunger for the softness of velvet shows her longing for possessing things (freedom, comfort, luxury, richness, satisfaction, pleasure) that were not allowed to women of her status, neither to Sethe's. Besides, her need for velvet in a way reminds us of Sethe's desire to wear a special dress in the day she got married to Halle. So, velvet may represent all the things that were denied to the poor and to the Blacks. Moreover, velvet may also be linked to the soft touch of Amy's hands on Sethe's backs (perhaps connoting the tenderness of a mother's touch?). When Amy touches Sethe's foot, although at first it causes some pain, later the touch is the source of comfort and alleviation. However, in spite of the healing power of a voice and hands as soft as velvet, and of transforming the

horrible scars into an image of beauty, Amy could not soften the marks on Sethe's back. Perhaps, this implies that, even with the comradeship of white women, black women are not able to achieve healing. Instead, the narrative of **Beloved** suggests that healing is achieved only within the community and with the help of the black male counterpart, which, in Sethe's case, is Paul D.

4.10 Locked doors and tobacco tins

When Paul D comes to 124 Bluestone Road eighteen years after the escape from Sweet Home to see Baby Suggs, she is already dead. He finds only Sethe and her daughter Denver living isolated from the black community in the haunted house. The position of the house, now standing apart from the community, and its ghostly depiction show the isolation and the unmanageable loss of its solitary inhabitants. The space that was for Baby Suggs a place of reunion, with its door always open, becomes a place of rage and spite after the white man's intrusion. The colors that once were on the house had faded away and because "those white things have taken all [Baby Suggs] had or dreamed" the house was "shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost"(p.89). The only thing that modifies the aspect of the house in a day Sethe comes from work is the figure of a black man sitting on the stairs of 124. It is Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men.

Paul D's arrival is for Sethe the key which partially unlocks the door of her remembrances of the past. Before, she wanted to remember as close to nothing as

it was safe, but now she can share her past with someone who was part of it. Paul D and Sethe lived in the ironically called Sweet Home plantation. The name of the farm clashes against its status: being a slave farm, it could not be “sweet”, in the same way that Mr. Garner’s (the Sweet Home’s owner) being a “generous” man clashes against the condition of his servants: even though he was good, the men at the farm were still slaves. Here, through irony, Morrison questions the patriarchal view of the slave society. The farm could be considered sweet by its owner, Mr. Garner, but not by the slaves who belonged to it. Although Mr. Garner was viewed as a tolerant and good master, this does not prevent him from owning black slaves. And although Garner refers to his slaves as “men”, they are considered so only because they belong to him. The power to name and to define belongs to the white master. As soon as schoolteacher comes to Sweet Home, Halle, Paul D and the other Pauls realize that they are not men, that they are slaves, and as such, will never be treated as men. That is, they were men only as long as they were under the protection of Mr. Garner. As soon as this protection no longer exists, they were considered property, like the animals that belonged to the farm. It was because of this kind of treatment that they decided to run away.

At Sethe’s house, Paul D has to fight to expel the ghost that haunts the house. He succeeds and learns that it was the ghost of one of Sethe’s daughter. After that, he and Sethe see the possibility of living together. He says “We can make a life girl.”(p.46). It is interesting that even in a house inhabited by black

people Paul D has to make some space for him. And this can be taken both literally and metaphorically. Literally because he had to employ both a physical and a psychological effort to expel the ghost. Symbolically because, to stay in the house, he has to make some space for himself as a man, a status that was denied to black males. While he lived in Sweet Home together with Halle, Sixo, and the other Pauls, he thought he was a man. But when Mr. Garner, their master, died and Mrs. Garner asked her brother-in-law to help her take care of the farm, Paul D realizes that the definition given him by Mr. Garner was not true.

Mr. Garner used to call his slaves men, and had an immeasurable pleasure to assert to other white men how proud he was of being courageous enough to define his black slaves as such. Dramatically, Paul D discovers how damaging was the illusion Mr. Garner has created, and it takes a long time and a rusted tobacco tin pried open for him to consider himself a man. This tobacco tin Paul D has locked inside his heart after his failed attempt to escape when Schoolteacher (Mrs. Garner's brother-in-law) came to Sweet Home. The tin contained all the physical and emotional pain, humiliation and tortures he experienced as a black slave. The claim over the free body was something that took some time and demanded great efforts and pain. Paul D discovered how painful it was to claim ownership over his own body in a scene that narrates the consequences of his failed attempt to run away from Sweet Home. He was with the bit in his mouth, a torture device that puts a wildness in the face of its user to such extent that it

could not be removed even after the bit was taken out. In this state, Paul D compared himself to Mister, a cock from Sweet Home, which had more freedom than himself: "Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher" because "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But [Paul D] wasn't allowed to be and stay what [he] was." After schoolteacher, Paul D did not consider himself a man: "Schoolteacher changed me. I was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (p.72).

After Sweet Home, Paul D was sold, and as he attempted to kill his new master, he was sent to prison in Alfred, Georgia. There, his already shattered manhood was totally destroyed as he was forced to felate the guards. What was worst for Paul D was the agreement that the slave men had to show in the act, for otherwise they would be tortured up to death. "Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?" or "Hungry, nigger?" asked the guards every morning, to which the black men had to answer "Yes, sir". What was left to those slaves prisoners in the chain-gang was the beating. With a hammer they beat and sang. The mystificatory value ascribed to the language of African-American people was expressed both in the songs and in the beating, so that they got it through while

they sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of

mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone. Of pork in the woods; meal in the pan; fish on the line; cane, rain and rocking chairs. (p.108)

As some aspects related to the history of the African-American women were not told in the slave narratives, the same happened to the black men's historical account of these times. Morrison, by including events such as those mentioned above, using the terms "mule" and "dog" to refer to the black woman and the black man, unveils things that the white dominant society would not allow to be openly mentioned in slave narratives. The physical effort of beating becomes the symbolic act of the Blacks' beating slavery. So, as Paul D says:

. . . they beat. The women for having known them and no more, no more; the children for having been them but never again. They killed a boss so often and so completely they had to bring him back to life to pump him one more time. Tasting hot mealcake among pine trees, they beat it away. Singing love songs to Mr. Death, they smashed his head. More than the rest, they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. (p.189)

Beating and singing were a means of attenuating the great humiliation of not being able to consider themselves men, of having to taste "hot mealcake", the activity contrasting to the virginity and abundance of nature and implying the liquid they have to suck from the white man's penis (the association to the word "children" bringing back images of childhood when they were not learned in these base things yet). Fortunately, a great flood happened, and the men in the

chain-gang managed to escape. Before coming to Sethe's house, Paul D spent seven years walking meanderingly from place to place, but always hidden because, even after the Emancipation Proclamation, black people were found shot, drowned, fired or hanged, as the novel shows us when Stamp Paid, the man who helped Sethe cross the river with the newborn Denver and one of Paul D's friends, finds a scalp of a black girl floating in the river.

Through the eighteen years after Sweet Home, Paul D learned to cope with the effect the color of his skin produced on the white men and on himself. During this time, in order to go on living, he beat up the past, and closed it into a tobacco tin inside his heart and threw the key of the locker away. His action reminds us of Sethe's attempt to lock her past memories in a place safe enough to avoid its reaching. Both Sethe and Paul D developed a psychological mechanism of self protection which tries to repress their most painful memories. When Paul D and Sethe meet again, they dare to start exposing some parts, just a little bit, of what they have lived.

4.11 Jumping into past memories

After expelling the ghost from 124, both Sethe and Paul D begin a journey back in an attempt to recover their less painful memories and, together, initiate a process of healing. Sethe finally envisions the possibility of having someone other than herself to take care of her tired breasts and her stripped back. Just after Paul

D's arrival there is a moment in the narrative in which Denver's feeling of rejection and isolation explodes and she cries before him. In that scene, through Sethe's mind, we learn that Paul D is a man who "could walk into a house and make a woman cry" (p.17), a man with such a blessed manner that

Strong women and wise saw him and told him things they only told each other: that way past the Change of Life, desire in them had suddenly become enormous, greedy, more savage than when they were fifteen, and that embarrassed them and made them sad ; that secretly they longed to die—to be quit of it—that sleep was more precious to them than any waking day. (p.17)

This passage depicts Paul D as a sensitive man, one that is invited to share the pain and secrets of black women, what, in a way, brings him into the circle of female friendship. Moreover, he is the man who pushes Sethe to the edge of their past memories and invites her to jump into them: "Jump if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles." (p.46). In **Beloved** Morrison tries to show the partnership that is needed between male and female and how the two "complement each other, fulfill one another or hurt one another and are made whole or prevented from wholeness by things that they have incorporated into their psyche" (Morrison interviewed by Christina Davis, Apud Gates Jr. and Appiah, 1993, p.419). Morrison develops the relationship between Sethe and Paul D in such a way that it encompasses the relationships between human beings in all their complexity

and ambiguity. Thus, at the beginning of the narrative we see that Paul D is not yet prepared to understand Sethe's story fully, for he misreads Sethe's focus of pain when she is ill-treated by schoolteacher, and he is shocked when he learns about Beloved's killing. When Sethe tells him about what schoolteacher and his nephews did to her, her terror is related to the milk theft and his to the beating of a pregnant woman : "They used cowhide on you?" "They beat you and you was pregnant?" to which Sethe replied twice, "And they took my milk." Therefore, contrary to Sethe, who was more concerned about the emotional hunger the act provoked in her, Paul D was disturbed by the physical pain inflicted on her. So that

Behind her, bending down, his body an arch of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches.... And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl." (p.17)

However, a little after, when they make love "half dressed and short of breath" in one of the two rooms upstairs, "where light came straight from the sky", they laid "side by side resentful of one another and the skylight above them" (p.22). There, "Paul D saw the float of her breasts" and the "revolting clump of scars" on her back and disliked it (p.21); and Sethe thought that perhaps

“a man was nothing but a man” (p.22). The resentment that pervades both Paul D and Sethe may be a reference to the difficulty of establishing a true love relationship between black men and women, the source of this difficulty coming from the slavery practice of breaking the ties of affectionate relationships among blacks. This seems to be emphasized by Sethe’s remembrance of the time she and her husband Halle had their first sexual relationship. Sethe’s memories are not expressed through the sexual act, but through poetical images of corn harvesting and eating: “The pulling down of the tight sheath, the ripping sound always convinced her it hurt. As soon as one strip of husk was down, the rest obeyed and the ear yielded up to [Halle] its shy rows, exposed at last. How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free.” (p.27)

Sethe and Paul D’s love relationship matures with the development of the narrative and we learn that Paul D helps Sethe understand some past things she missed, as for example, what the milk theft represented for her husband Halle and why he was not able to react against those who provoked it when he says that “a man ain’t a goddamn ax . . . Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside”(p.69). So, it is through Paul D’s narrative that Sethe picks out meaning from a fact she could not understand alone as a woman. The possibility of making a new life out of past memories leads Sethe to imagine a future life with Paul D, and his arrival offers to Sethe and Denver the possibility of reestablishing the connection with the communal life. However, their hopes are

shattered by the coming of a strange woman they find at the steps of 124 when they come home from a Carnival party in town.

While Paul D, Sethe and Denver were walking towards the town to the Carnival feast, Sethe sees three shadows holding hands and she thinks that the shadows are a sign of themselves in the future. However, taking into consideration the image and the strong scent of dying roses that was spread through the air while they were going to town, and that Paul D was the first to smell it, we realize that, symbolically, what is implied is decadence and death, and this foreshadows what is to come.

4.12 The past becomes flesh

When Sethe, Paul D and Denver approach the house they see a strange woman sleeping on the front steps of 124. When Sethe sees the woman, her bladder fills to capacity and she has to go to the back of the house to let it run. This instance brings back to her memory the need she felt when she first saw her mother in the fields, and more than that, it brought to her the moment of Denver's birth, when "there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (p.51).

The woman that appeared at 124 is described as a new-born baby, with her "new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands"(p.50). "Her skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and

thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under the hat”(p.51). The girl is thirsty and drinks cup after cup of water, “as though she had crossed a desert”(p.51). The first meeting between Sethe and the strange girl is depicted through water imagery, which foreshadows and reinforces the link between them in terms of mother and child since water is connected to the amniotic liquid, and therefore, to giving birth. Besides, this meeting rescues important moments in the narrative such as Sethe’s own birth, associated to the sea, and Denver’s coming to life, linked to the crossing of the Ohio.

Sethe and Denver let the girl stay and they learn that her name is Beloved, the same name Sethe got marked on her daughter’s gravestone in exchange for ten minutes of sex with the engraver, “her knees wide open as any grave” (p.5). Denver has a great pleasure in taking care of Beloved for she recognizes the girl as her dead sister. Paul D’s reaction to the girl is different from that of the women in the house, and he is suspicious of the stranger’s origin. Sethe, on the other hand, gradually becomes affectionate to her and finally gets to the conclusion that Beloved is really her older daughter that came to life again to give Sethe a chance to explain things she had done in the past. Beloved frequently asks questions that bring back to Sethe the memories of her own mother, thus reinforcing their own mother-daughter relationship. When Beloved asks Sethe “Where our diamonds?” “Your woman she never fix up your hair?” and “Tell me your earrings” (p.63),

the earrings she used to wear when Beloved was around two years old and the incident happened and which were taken out from Sethe at the prison, we, readers, together with the characters and the narrator(s) become astonished: “How did she know?” (p.63). Sethe, however, becomes sure of Beloved’s identity when she hears her humming a song Sethe herself used to sing to her children, and since nobody knew it, it was proved that this was really her own daughter.

Both Denver and Sethe are convinced that Beloved is the baby ghost who returned as a woman to reclaim her place in the family since she could not stay at 124 as a ghost because she was expelled by Paul D. This belief prompts Sethe to make plans for a family life with all her children back home, for if a dead child could come back to life, why cannot the boys return home too? Meanwhile, as Beloved wants Sethe only to herself, she manages to expel Paul D from the house by seducing him. The chapter in which we learn about it starts like this: “SHE MOVED HIM.” Here, as Wyatt puts it, “metaphors abandon their symbolic dimension to adhere to a baseline of literal meaning” (Wyatt, 1993, p.475). The sentence that initiates the chapter “she moved him” suggests not an emotional effect, but the physical act of moving someone from one place to another. The change from the abstract to the concrete is compatible not only to Morrison’s intention of making real a language and a history that were silenced by the Western ideology, but also “an effect congruent with Morrison’s emphasis on

embodiment—on both the physical processes of maternity and the concrete presence of the ghost”(Wyatt, 1993, p.475). Morrison herself explained that slavery is “an abstract concept” and because of this she employed the device of the ghost. Making it real is a means of “making history possible, making memory real—somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table, so you have to think about it”. (Morrison Apud Darling, 1988, p.6)

Paul D’s outward movement began when he started feeling uncomfortable in the house and “didn’t want to be there”, in any place inside it. So he moved restlessly from Sethe’s room to the rocking chair in the kitchen, to Baby’s bed, to the storeroom, and finally he could not manage being there anymore, so he left Sethe’s house. However, it was not because of his relationship to Sethe that he was moving, for he “realized the movement was involuntary. He wasn’t being nervous; he was being prevented.”(p.116)

When Beloved seduces Paul D, she urges him to call her name and to touch her inside parts, to which he at first did not agree. However, as she insists on it, he pronounces the word Beloved. When he does this, Beloved gets closer and Paul D is impelled to touch the inside parts. The inner contact with Beloved provokes the opening of his tobacco tin and the only thing he is able to do is to repeat “Red heart. Red heart” (p.117), thus connecting his encounter with Beloved to his awakening as a man. If we take Beloved as the representation of

memories of slavery, it is only when the characters are able to recover them and to truly face them that they can feel themselves really alive.

The physical presence of Beloved is the means by which the ghostly history of black people achieves its materialization. So that Sethe, Paul D, and the community as well, have to confront this woman in nakedness, an act that implies the confrontation with slavery itself. As Beloved lives in the house and moves Paul D, she gets a pregnant belly and drains all of Sethe's energy, (the pregnancy may, symbolically and ironically, refer to the white man's profit over black slave bodies) so she may represent the ghost of slavery incarnated. However, if negatively she embodies all that the characters want to forget, positively she forces them to face their past, and by facing it, they become apt to reunite again in communal life and to develop true love relationships. Beloved's characterization is ambiguous, and her materialization affects the individual and the community both negatively and positively. In this ambiguity we see how Morrison shatters the notion of objective reality, thus revealing the layers of meanings that exist both in fiction and in life.

After Paul D moves to the storeroom he learns about Sethe's act of infanticide through an old newspaper Stamp Paid showed to him. The status reserved to Black people is revised once again when Paul D mentions that

. . .there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outrun a street mob. Nor it was there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary—something whitepeople would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. . . (p.156)

Paul D, nevertheless, is not convinced that the woman in the paper is Sethe, the Sethe he knew at Sweet Home, Halle's wife, because he cannot recognize the woman's mouth in the newspaper as Sethe's. And the more Stamp tried to show him that this woman was Sethe, the less Paul D believed in it. So he goes after Sethe and shows her the picture. Sethe could not answer Paul D's questions openly and state that, yes, she killed her baby daughter. Instead, she kept circling around the subject. However, "Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask." (163)

Wyatt suggests that Sethe would never be able to put her act into words because of her maternal subjectivity, "which is so embedded in her children that it both allows her to take the life of one of them and precludes putting that act into words" and that, because of the connections and the sense of continuity she establishes with her children, it is "difficult for her to take the position of narrating subject and tell her story" (Wyatt, 1993, p.476). Wyatt's point is that

Sethe does not allow herself to substitute words for things because Sethe's "standpoint of nursing mother precludes separation and the substitutions that any separation would require"(Wyatt, 1993, p.477). Underlying this is Morrison's consciousness of the difficulty writers have to face in order to put things appropriately into words. Since Sethe's trauma is very difficult to be narrated, Morrison had to work with other resources. And perhaps that is one of the reasons Morrison resorts to Magic Realism, to visual and cinematic images, to the richness of sounds, to parodies and puns, to intertextuality, to the blurring and conflation of narrators, to the mirroring effect and its inversions, and to the stream of consciousness technique.

When Sethe feels obliged to explain to Paul D what really happened eighteen years before, it is not she, but an omniscient narrator who explains it to us:

Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (p.163)

To Paul D Sethe tells simply that she stopped schoolteacher and put her children in a safe place. Paul D is not able to understand Sethe's love, which he thinks is "too thick", and therefore, dangerous to a slave woman:

This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe has done was what she claimed. (p.164)

Sethe's claim for owning her own children inverted the Master's discourse of possession. This inversion, however, cost too much: the price was the death of one of her "best things" and the pain to live with its ghost. Also, it was the act of hearing from Paul D that there could have been some other way to it, and of facing the "forest" that "sprang up between them" when he said "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (p.165), reminding Sethe of the animal characteristics schoolteacher used to describe black people.

In the second part of the book, when Paul D is not living at 124 anymore, Sethe, Denver and Beloved start to live to the full the pleasure of being together as mother and daughters. Sethe then makes plans to explain to Beloved why, in a moment of desperation, she killed one of her daughters:

... I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tender her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children . . . (p.200).

Sethe starts to live exclusively to fulfill Beloved's needs, quitting her job and living apart from the outside world: "Whatever is going outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room." (p.183). For Sethe this is a time of searching for new colors, of creating new pleasures to satisfy Beloved's needs. She, who could not stand red because it was linked to the blood that sprang from Beloved's neck, was now eager to notice it in vegetables, fruits and pieces of cloth. In order to fulfill all those times in which there was no color in her life, Sethe buys fabrics of several colors and sews dresses that resemble costumes for a Carnival party.

In this second part of the novel, in three separate chapters Morrison exposes subsequently Sethe's, Denver's and Beloved's source of anguish, all of them related to the consequences of slavery, 'the circle of iron that choked' their lives. From these chapters, the one that shows Beloved's stream of consciousness rescues the physical, historical and cultural landscapes of African-Americans. In this chapter, the language is visually fragmented and disjointed as a means to recapture the sensations of the Middle-Passage. In a way this fragmentation tries

to show visually the situation of a people, its disassembled parts and scattered familial bonds.

4.13 The Middle Passage and Beloved's significance

As Wyatt notices, Beloved assumes a double role: "on the personal level, Beloved is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in **Beloved**, the ghost represents—as the generic name Beloved suggests—all the loved ones lost through slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the slave ships." (p.479). Beloved gives an account of this experience, dislocating historical linear barriers of time and space:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time
when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching
too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his
face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked
 some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men
without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have
none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight
comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am
not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is
thrashing but there is no room to do it if we had more to drink
we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water
so the men without skin bring us theirs
 in the beginning the women are away from the men and the
men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men
into the women and the women into the men (p.210)

Beloved's stream of consciousness, its fragmented language and its lack of structural demarcations make us feel confused and disoriented, lost in time and

space. This confusion suits Morrison's desire to arrest the readers' sensations together with those of the slaves, as the language "imitates the disorientation of the Africans who were thrown into the slave ships without explanation, suspended without boundaries in time and space"(Wyatt, 1993, p.480). The whole novel and specially Beloved's narrative is a dialogue with traditional slave narratives, and with essays and poems such as Richard Wright's **Our strange Birth**, or Robert Hayden's poem "Middle Passage". Wright describes the Middle Passage as a "weird and paradoxical birth" and Hayden states it poetically as a "voyage through death to life upon these shores" (Apud Wyatt, 1993, p.480).

Morrison connects Beloved to the "Sixty Million and more" in the epigraph of the novel by identifying her with a woman that crossed the Atlantic in a slave ship: "I see the dark face that is going to smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around her neck. . . she goes in the water with my face"(p.212). Morrison deepens the signification of loss and hunger by stretching the conflation between Beloved's face and the woman's to Sethe's own face when Beloved says: ". . .the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost. . ." (p.213)

Beloved, who becomes again a ghost, (she disappears at the end of the novel) is a character that is traced back to Africa, associated with memories of

slave catchers capturing her mother and the black people and bringing them to America in the slave ships. One means for the blacks to recover identity is to reinscribe their history into History, and that is what Morrison tries to do through her novel. In order to do it more effectively, Morrison goes further and portrays imaginatively a passage in the black people's collective unconscious that has no written record: the Middle Passage, the voyage in the slave ship that crossed the Atlantic bringing the slaves from Africa.

Following the conflation of characters, the chapter that comes after Beloved's stream of consciousness poetically combines the desire of union by blurring the voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in a speech that in its form resembles a poem with alternate rhymes :

Beloved
 You are my sister
 You are my daughter
 You are my face; you are me
 I have found you again; you have come back to me
 You are my Beloved
 You are mine
 You are mine
 You are mine

I have your milk
 I have your smile
 I will take care of you

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
 I will never leave you again
 Don't ever leave me again
 You went in the water
 I drank your blood
 I brought your milk

You forgot to smile
 I loved you
 You hurt me
 You came back to me
 You left me

The alternation of voices ends up being like mirrors, one reflecting and reproducing the other in such a way that it is impossible to know who is who, which conflates three in one:

I waited for you
 You are mine
 You are mine
 You are mine

As Wyatt observes, “while a spoken dialogue (ideally) moves toward something new with the difference voiced by one speaker moving the other speaker away from his or her original position, the dialogue among the three women imitates a mother-infant dialectic: it is motivated not by difference but by the desire to ascertain that the other is there and that the other is the same” (Wyatt, 1993, p.481). This desire is strengthened by the lack of punctuation, which leaves “the sentence of each participant open to the sentence of the next speaker” and by the interchangeability that marks the pronouns *I* and *you*, which finally “mesh in the possessive *mine*.” (Wyatt, 1993, p.481).

If language in a way “bends” to Beloved’s desire, as Wyatt argues, Sethe and Denver also bend totally to it. Beloved, however, is never satisfied. Day by

day she wants more and more from Sethe. Denver, who at the beginning was afraid that Sethe could kill Beloved again, gradually notices that now it is the other way around. If first she thought she had to protect Beloved, now she is sure that Sethe is the one who needs protection, for Beloved is eating up her mother. The roles become inverted and

. . . Beloved bending over Sethe looked like the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (p.250).

Beloved is a character that connects the African past to the people who live in America. There is a lot of discussion regarding the character of Beloved, whether she is really Sethe's baby-ghost incarnate or whether she is only another character whose appearance at 124 Bluestone Road happens under circumstances that lead people to recognize her as the representation of the ghost. Elizabeth B. House suggests that Beloved is not a ghost but a "woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery." (House, 1991, p.17). In her essay, House argues that Beloved has nothing to do with a supernatural being. Nevertheless, although there are many points in which her reading could be acceptable, her argument

fails at the end of the novel when she mentions that Beloved runs away while in fact this is not stated in the novel. House was not able to explain reasonably how Beloved disappeared. The attempt to read **Beloved** as a realist novel does not match the whole atmosphere the author conveys through the narrative. Moreover, part of the novel's enchantment is due to what the reader cannot explain and to the author's attempt to maintain some things veiled.

The significance of Beloved does not lie in the dispute as to whether she is a ghost incarnated or a "real" character. Instead, what really matters is what she represents in the context of the novel. One possible reading of her character is as a representative of a matrilineal connection between Africa and America, as posed by Debora Horvitz . For her, Beloved "stands for every African woman whose story will never be told"(Horvitz, 1989, p.157). She symbolizes the mothers and daughters who were stolen from the other side of the Atlantic, and as such, she is "invulnerable to barriers of time, space and place" (p.157). This invulnerability is portrayed through a fluidity of character that connects the past to the present moment of the narrative. Therefore, Beloved can be at Bluestone Road at Cincinnati but at the same time she can be in the basement of the slave ship and can give vivid and horrific accounts of a voyage lived by the "Sixty Million and more". As Horvitz argues, although Beloved represents something larger than a character, she has roots within a specific family. At a personal level, therefore, she is the baby ghost incarnate. Nevertheless, despite this specificity,

Beloved stands for “the spirit of all the women dragged onto the slave ships in Africa and also all black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them”. (Horvitz, 1989, p.157).

From Beloved’s stream of consciousness comes out a story that describes how a woman was captured by the “men without skin” while she was picking flowers in Africa. The girl is with her mother and tries to help her, but the smoke does not permit her to see where her mother is. This smoke may be related to the gun smoke that spread while the slave catchers were capturing the Africans. When Beloved is recalling this moment, the memories are so vivid that everything seems to be happening “now”. The passage recalls how it was to be in the bottom of a slave ship overcrowded with crouching people. When storms mixed “the men into the women and the women into the men” Beloved meets a man that seems to be her father, for she stands at his back and stays with him. However, the figure that she really wants to meet in the ship is her mother, whom she lost when she was captured and another time when her mother leapt into the sea. At this moment Beloved starts realizing that the woman has her face. “she goes in the water with my face” (p.212). Beloved’s attempt to meet her mother failed a third time, when she sees her mother’s image on the surface of a river bank, under a bridge. The image is her own. This unification, that is, the woman in the water who becomes the character herself “her face is mine” (p.213) reflects a union between mother and daughter, between past and present, in a simultaneity of

being that represents Morrison's aim to create an alternative personal history that embodies the history of the black woman.

Beloved also represents the significance of the past in the configuration of the present. The present time of the characters is shaped by what they have undergone in the past. The narrative posits the imperative necessity of rescuing the unwritten history of African-American people and facing it in its nakedness. However, it also suggests that we have to avoid being powerlessly entangled in it. We should not let the past dominate the present, otherwise we will become a teetering Sethe suffocated by a pregnant Beloved. Instead, we need to know the past in order to learn how to change the present. Perhaps we should be like Denver. She has had an intimate contact with the past, but when she realized that Beloved was consuming her mother little by little, that it was not Beloved that needed protection, but Sethe, and that the three of them were on the verge of being swallowed by the ghosts of the past, she decided that it was time to stop it and to find a way to change it.

The interchangeability of maternal roles in the narrative of **Beloved** is revealed once again when Denver realizes that it is not Beloved that has to be protected but Sethe. If throughout her life Denver lived in the womb-tomb likeness of her grandmother's house (which in fact was not hers, but a white abolitionist's house), afraid that the white men, "those white things outside", could come again in the yard and prompt her mother to repeat the act of

infanticide, now she realizes that the only one who can step out of the circle that surrounded her is herself. Assuming Sethe's maternal role of feeder and supplier, she starts to find alternative ways to support both her mother and her sister.

4.14 Spores of bluefern: the hope of a future out of the circle of slavery

Denver, like the spores of bluefern in which seeds of a "whole generation sleeps confident of a future"(p.84), opens up to the world and trusts herself as able to transit between the white and the black community. Being born out of the circle of slavery that encompassed the other members of her family, she could look at it, touch it, and live with it for a time, but she could no longer accept it. It was this contact with the past, with the horrors of slavery, with the circle of iron and the savageness of the bit, and the consequences of these means of oppression, which helped her to mature and to search for different life-alternatives.

Denver's first step towards the outer world demands great efforts from her. It is with Baby Suggs's spiritual encouragement, with her voice saying ". . .go out the yard. Go on" that she manages to overcome her fears. The first person Denver asks for help is Lady Jones, a woman who taught her the pleasure of the written words before the doomed day in which she became dumb due to a question a friend asked about her mother. The question was related to Sethe's murder and the dumbness that came on her after it can be associated to Sethe's own retreat

from the community and on her attempt to lock her memories. Denver could speak again only when the baby ghost gave signs of its presence at 124. For years she lived in isolation, having only Beloved's ghost and Sethe as her companion.

While Denver's life in the community improves, the neighbors learn about Sethe's illness and also about Beloved's presence. The community then, convinced by Ella, one of Sethe's old friends, goes to Sethe's house and sings to exorcise the ghost. Sethe cannot resist their singing and both she and Beloved go to the front porch of 124. However, as Sethe stands at the front yard she sees a man "without skin" coming and recalls another moment in her life in which she had made a wrong choice. But now, she thinks, she is going to do the opposite. Instead of killing her child, she is going to kill the man who comes to pick up her child. The man is in fact the abolitionist Edward Bodwin, and he is coming to give Denver a ride to work. Sethe, misunderstanding him for a slave catcher, holds an ice pick in her hand and tries to kill him. However, the women from the community prevent it, holding Sethe and the ice pick. Beloved, then, feeling abandoned once more, disappears. Morrison is being ironic and ambiguous again when she makes Sethe associate Edward Bodwin to a "man without skin", an image that is also a reference to slave catchers and slave masters.

If, on one hand, Bodwin is a white man who, in the old times, fought for the abolitionist cause, and who is going to take Denver to a place that means to her the beginning of a new life, his approach may also represent the danger of

another kind of slavery: the servitude that is still imposed on black people. And despite the fact that Denver was being treated “more than all right” at the Bodwins’ and that Mrs. Bodwin was teaching her stuff and “experimenting” on her, the word experimenting perhaps ironically connoting the idea of the whites’ intellectual superiority, we cannot forget Paul D’s thought: “Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher” (p.266), which reminds us again of Sweet Home and schoolteacher’s attempt to prove the inferiority of black people.

Denver finds a job and soon is reintegrated to communal life. However, Morrison uses irony and ambiguity when the narrator describes her contact with the Bodwins, the family who helped Baby Suggs when she moved to Cincinnati. At the Bodwins’ Denver obtains a job. However, when she is leaving, the narrator tells us that she notices the statue of a black boy with his open mouth full of money and she reads the inscription painted on the pedestal of the knelt boy: “At Yo Service”. Although Denver does not give thought to the little figure, the inclusion of this scene possibly means that black people have to be aware of the fact that, although they are not slaves anymore because now they are paid for the work they do, they can still be oppressed and humiliated.

Since her childhood, Denver has been afraid of the white man’s presence in her house. However, it is through her that a white man enters again the yard of 124, prompting Sethe to reenact and try to change the most dramatic event of her

past. It is also through her that Morrison voices her concern for the situation of many black young women trying to step out into the world to find other possibilities for their lives. At the same time that they have to be confident, they have to watch out.

4.15 Putting stories together

In the chapter that follows Denver's opening to the world, Morrison reshapes the relationship between Sethe and Paul D. If the previous chapter reinforced the role of the community in someone's life, this shows how mature male-female relationships can also contribute to healing. When Paul D learns that Sethe is ill and goes to 124 to visit her, "his coming is the reverse route of his going. First the cold house, the storeroom, then the kitchen before he tackles the beds." (p.263). The bed is the place in which Sethe is, Baby Suggs' bed, the place in which she waited for death. When Paul D realizes this, he shouts: "Don't you die on me!" (p.271), and adds: "Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I'm take care of you, you hear?" (p.272). Paul D intends to rub Sethe's feet and to wash her body, this reminding us of the maternal care Amy and Baby Suggs had with her.

Sethe carefully thinks about Paul D's intentions: "Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands and thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (p.272).

Moreover, Sethe now wants to tell him things that women only tell to each other and things that now she is able to voice to him and to us readers: “that time didn’t stay up; that she called, but Howard and Buglar walked on down the railroad track and couldn’t hear her; that Amy was scared to stay with her because her feet were ugly and her back looked so bad; that her ma’am had hurt her feelings and she couldn’t find her hat anywhere . . .” (p.272) and that Beloved was her best thing, trying, for the last time in the narrative, to explain why she killed her daughter.

If Sethe needs a man to mend her parts together she finds him in Paul D. But she also helps him put himself together. He thinks about Sethe remembering what his friend Sixo said about the woman he loved: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces that I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.” (p.272-273). Paul D wants to have a life with Sethe. “Her tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers (p.273).

Morrison seems to suggest that the strength of their relationship lies in the act of exposing to one another the fragility hidden in their tired bodies, so that locked doors and rusted tobacco tins are pried open. And they need one another,

and one another's stories, to have their parts mended together. For the first time in her life Sethe thinks about herself as a subject, a woman, and not only as her children's mother. Her "Me? Me?" (p.273) closes this chapter and suggests a final act of healing in her union with Paul D and in her discovery of her own "self".

4.16 Some words about discourse and speech in *Beloved*

Morrison uses many strategies to improve signification in **Beloved**. One of these is found in the way she deals with the voices of the narrator(s) and of the characters. The narrative technique she uses can be found in Dostoivesky's novels, in which the speech of another is introduced in the narrators' and in the characters' voice in concealed form. Here I am going to use some of Bakhtin's ideas in his analysis of language in Dostoivesky's poetics and his concepts of "pseudo-objective motivation" and "quasi-direct discourse". According to Bakhtin, pseudo-objective motivation is found in the discourse of the narrator when the subjective, emotional voice of the characters is included in the narrator's objective voice. "Pseudo-objective motivation is generally characteristic of novel style, since it is one of the manifold forms for concealing another's speech in hybrid constructions"(Bakhtin, p.305, 1992). Bakhtin argues that the narrative technique that ignores precise formal boundaries between the narrators' and the characters' discourse is highly productive. The use of "a

particular belief system belonging to someone else, a particular point of view on the world belonging to someone else” can be productive for authors because “it is able on the one hand to show the object of representation in a new light (to reveal new sides or dimensions in it) and on the other hand to illuminate in a new way the ‘expected’ literary horizon”(Bakhtin, 1992, p.312-313). Quasi-direct discourse, on the other hand, offers a possibility of organizing the heteroglossia (the multiplicity and diversity of voices and meanings contained in an utterance) characteristic of any given discourse.

Moreover, Bakhtin states that quasi-direct discourse

introduces order and stylistic symmetry into the disorderly and impetuous flow of a character's internal speech (a disorder and impetuosity would otherwise have to be re-processed into direct speech) and, moreover, through its syntactic (third-person) and basic stylistic markers (lexicological and other), such a form permits another's inner speech to merge, in an organic and structured way, with a context belonging to the author. But at the same time it is precisely this form that permits us to preserve the expressive structure of the character's inner speech, its inability to exhaust itself in words, its flexibility, which would be absolutely impossible within the dry and logical form of indirect discourse.”(Bakhtin, 1992, p.319)

Morrison organizes the speech of her characters in **Beloved** in such a way that the narrator's and the characters's voices come together in the same utterance. I am going to quote here some passages that show how she deals with the conflation of narrator and characters. Just at the beginning of the novel, in a

scene in which Sethe and Denver call forth the ghost, Denver says that “For a baby she throws a powerful spell”, we see how Morrison mingles Sethe’s direct speech with the inner speech of her memory and with another’s speech when she remembers that she had to make sex with the engraver to have the word “Beloved” set on the headstone of her daughter’s grave:

“No more powerful than the way I loved her,” Sethe answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as a finger nail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips. Ten minutes he said. You got ten minutes I’ll do it for free. (p.5)

In this passage, we see Sethe’s direct answer to Denver. Her answer is connected to the memory of the payment she had to make. Mingled with this remembrance is the quasi-direct speech of the engraver which is not direct only because it lacks the formal marks that characterize direct speech. The engraver’s utterance addresses Sethe directly by the use of “you” and “I”. Moreover, in this passage we can see how Morrison manages to insert together what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, or two different discourses and world views that are stated in a single utterance: Sethe’s “knees wide open as any grave” connecting her act to death, and the engraver’s speech showing the status given to black women.

Another moment in which we can notice the conflation of speeches is in a scene in which Sethe and Paul D had just finished making love and are taken by their thoughts. At the moment in which Sethe is reflecting about their sexual intercourse, Morrison introduces Baby Suggs's direct speech and changes to an omniscient narration that mingles Sethe's knowledge about Baby Suggs's motherhood and Baby's own experience:

"A man ain't nothing but a man," said Baby Suggs. "But a son? Well now, that's *somebody*."

It made sense for a lot of reasons because in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. . . . What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces include their children. Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for the *hearing* that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her—only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. "God take what he would," she said. And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing. (p.23)

Although great part of this speech belongs, in its formal marks (third-person narration and punctuation), to an omniscient narrator, we can see that it contains within it other characters' inner speech and a communal knowledge expressed in the word *hearing*. Also, this passage mingles different world visions

about motherhood: Baby Suggs's and black women's perspective clashing against the ideology of the white masters. Two different discourses are put together, one informing the other and extending the meanings of motherhood in slavery.

A third moment that shows Morrison's ability to conflate voices and discourses in the narrative is when Sethe, Beloved, and Denver reunite and voice their inner desires. Although at this moment the speech is simple in its lexical aspect, it implies a complex net of interwoven relationships. The passage lacks the marks of direct speech, but the word order and the pronouns used are characteristic of this kind of speech:

I waited for you
 You are mine
 You are mine
 You are mine
 (p.217)

In this part we know that Sethe, Beloved and Denver are together and these words could be uttered by any of them or by the three at the same time. Although the words are the same, the meaning is different for each character for, hidden inside this utterance, there are different female experiences: Sethe's act of infanticide, her urgency to feed and protect her children, her longing to have them back at 124 and a counternarrative to the master's narrative; Denver's desire for companion and to have someone to feed in with stories; and Beloved's

unimaginable loneliness, her hunger for maternal love and her need to have her face reflected in her mother's face.

These are just a few examples to show how Morrison explores heteroglossia and dialogical relations of language in the speech of some of her narrators and characters in **Beloved**, employing several kinds of discourses and speeches and expanding the possibilities of the quasi-direct speech to its maximum. In the Bakhtinian thought, language is an area of social conflict, specially "in the ways the discourse of characters in a literary work may disrupt and subvert the authority of ideology as expressed in a single voice of a narrator" (Guerin et al, 1992, p.301). In **Beloved**, as well as in her other novels, Morrison mingles the authorial voice of different narrators to the characters' freedom of speech. Thus, she conveys also in the narrative form the multiplicity of voices that had been silenced in traditional historical discourse. Moreover, in the narrative technique employed in **Beloved** Morrison tried to represent the complexity and ambiguity that has permeated the black women's history of abuse and oppression.

POST SCRIPT

“This is not a story to pass on”

Beloved seems to have two endings. One that closes the narrative with Sethe and Paul D, and another, the last chapter, in which it seems that Morrison addresses the reader. In this chapter she mentions “a loneliness that can be rocked” and “a loneliness that roams”. While I do not know exactly what she means when she refers to these two kinds of loneliness, I would risk to suggest that, perhaps, the first one signifies the loneliness that black people could manage when they were set apart from communal life and the second, the unbearable loneliness of black mothers separated from their children, one that roams, and that cannot be controlled.

The second paragraph of this chapter, although it refers to *Beloved*, addresses the black women’s situation in slavery and after:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where the long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her away. (p.274)

Morrison reinforces the ambiguity and complexity of telling a story that was veiled by centuries of oppression when she uses the expression “to pass on” at the end of the narrative. The verb ‘pass on’ has two meanings. One that means to die, to pass away. Another that refers to the act of telling something to another person, to repeat a story or a message to other people. The story of black people, specially the black woman’s, “was not a story to pass on”, says Morrison twice. The verb tense is in the past because now the story has been told. However, despite the fact that this is such a brutal story that it should not be told and because “things will never be the same” if people dare to tell it, Morrison adverts that “This is not a story to pass on”. When she uses the present tense, Morrison is emphasizing the necessity of keeping this story alive, of not letting it die, of repeating it to the generations that are to come as a means to avoid its being repeated again, as a way to prevent black people from living once more what they experienced in slavery. At the end of the novel Morrison closes the narrative with the word “Beloved”, thus claiming what was not claimed.

The Latin American writer Alejo Carpentier sees the literary writer as someone who interprets and gives expression to his/her own times imaginatively and, as Antonio Fama argues, for Carpentier, “el novelista es la consciencia de su época y la novela configura el proceso histórico”(Fama, 1991, p.138). From this view-point, we can say that Morrison’s literary work answers the questions posed by her own time and her own social context, being the consciousness of her

people. In the Afro-American context of the twentieth century there have been many debates about the identity of Black people, and Black women in particular, and this identity has been shaped mainly through literary portraits of black females throughout slavery and after. Morrison's **Beloved** gives an alternative status to black women in literature and in history, focusing on the role of motherhood in the African-American experience.

Barbara Rigney, mentioning the historicity of Morrison's novels, says that they are "quasi documentaries that bear historical witness" and that "her characters are both subjects *of* and subjects *to* history, events in "real" time, that succession of antagonistic movements that includes slavery, reconstruction, depression, and war." However, Morrison "is also concerned with the interaction of history with art, theory, and even fantasy, for, in her terms, history itself may be no more than a brutal fantasy, a nightmare half-remembered, in which fact and symbol become indistinguishable." (Rigney, 1991, p.61).

The way Morrison works with time and space in this novel helps to convey not only the fluidity of the character Beloved, but also shows how memory works back and forth in the mind of other characters and how it shapes the history of their lives. Since there are almost no written accounts of the lives of slave women written from their own point of view, they had to build their identity as black women on the oral tradition that was passed to them through their mothers.

Morrison, by re-framing the world through a language and history that privileges the magical reality of black people offers new possibilities of interpretation. In **Beloved**, Morrison works with the “themes and motifs omitted from the conventions of the slave narratives”, employing cinematic and literary techniques that enrich the narrative of a people devoid of language “their own tribal language and all written language as well”. However, Morrison was able to claim “the visual and visceral traces of the past.” (Koolish, 1995, p.422).

Morrison’s eyes, focusing on the absences, works like a camera which registers the information that was hidden under the silence of the slave woman. Such gaps demand a strong intellectual and emotional involvement on the part of the reader. Morrison works hypnotically and cyclically with recurring images of pain and loss, such as milk theft, cowhide beatings, torture by the bit, sexual and economic exploitation, abortion, birth and rebirth.

Intentionally, Morrison leaves some things open in the narrative. For example, we never know exactly what happened to Halle after Sethe’s escape, or to Howard and Buglar, as we are never sure about Beloved’s identity. Although the narrative leads us to conclude that she is Sethe’s baby ghost incarnate, some characters relate her to a woman kept by a white man who was killed. Perhaps intentionally, as a means to emphasize the elusiveness of truth, of not knowing what really happened to some of the “Sixty Million and More” Morrison leaves their fate open.

Beloved's narrative and the whole novel follow the structure of memory in its "disjointed, circular, insistent, urgent" need to re-frame the past (Koolish, 1995, p.422). Morrison avoids the linearity of the narrative by retelling the stories, re-framing time and space by means of different tellers, each one adding new versions to the same issue. Sethe's own retelling of the motivations for killing her daughter also work in the same way. Each time she comments on it, she fills her story with new information, thus enlarging our understanding of what it meant to be a slave mother.

Besides being a literary technique obviously influenced by Faulkner's, the disruption of chronology in the novel stands against the chronology of traditional slave narratives and works as a way to claim a people's possession of their own history:

Reinstating time, reclaiming it for one's own is not only a narrative device but also a thematic response to dispossession; cut off from their language and history, denied a present which they could call their own, slaves were also denied a future which they could control. Morrison privileges dreams, memory, and imagination in the novel partly because these were among the few possessions which could not be stolen from African American. (Koolish, 1995, p.423).

One question posed by the analysis of slave narratives is related to the issue of treating them as historical facts, as real events. Although we have seen before that these narratives also have a fictionality based on the necessity to achieve a specific white audience, they are the closest records we have of the

lives of slave people. By presenting a counterpart of these slave narratives through visual and cinematic images, inversions, parodies, intertextuality, heteroglossia and quasi-direct speech, Morrison validates the true nature of their content and adds the possibility of exploring its “unspeakable thoughts unspoken.”

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